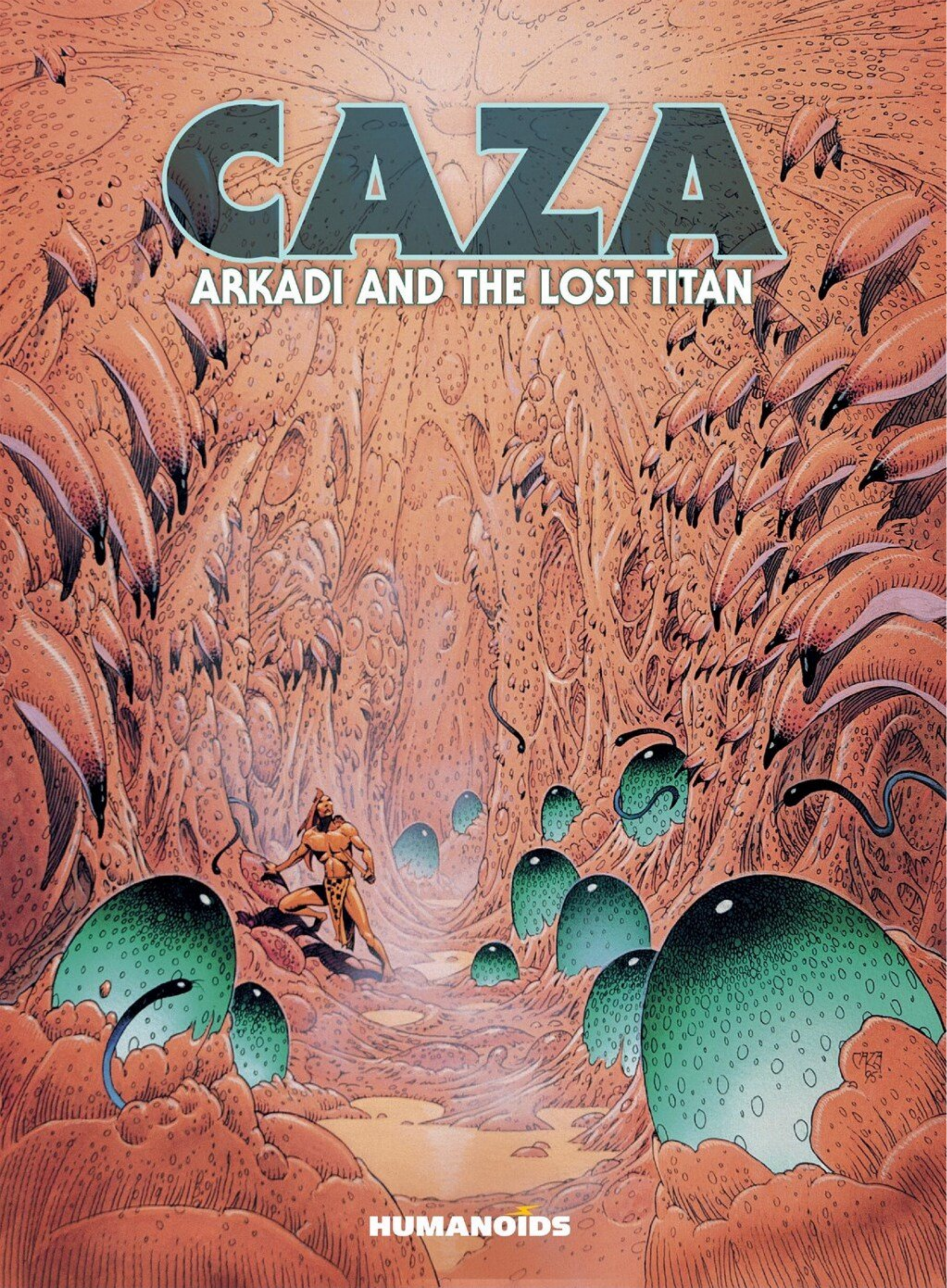
CAZA

ARKADI AND THE LOST TITAN



HUMANOIDS

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Chapters 1 to 6 were first published in France between 1989 and 1996 under the title "Le Monde d'Arkadi," and later re-released in a new edition under the title "Chroniques de la Terre fixe" along with a prologue and chapters 7 to 9 which were published in France between 1999 and 2008.

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FOREWORD

In December 1974, in Paris, France, Jean-Pierre Dionnet, Philippe Druillet, and Mœbius founded Les Humanoïdes Associés, which I later renamed Humanoids for its international incarnation. The following month, they released the first issue of *Métal Hurlant*, a magazine that revolutionized the comic medium and left a lasting impact on pop culture—spanning cinema, music, video games, and more—through numerous translations and adaptations worldwide, including *Heavy Metal* magazine in 1977.

Philippe Caza played a significant role in this artistic and cultural movement. When he joined the pages of *Métal Hurlant* in December 1976, at the age of thirty-five, Caza already had a solid reputation as a science fiction illustrator and comic book artist. However, what he encountered in *Métal Hurlant* and Humanoids was a creative environment unlike any other—one that offered boundless freedom for narrative and graphic experimentation. Caza seized this opportunity with both hands.

Reflecting on his twenties in the 1970s, composer Hans Zimmer recalls the profound impact Caza's work had on him: "I never took drugs. I could just lose myself in the hypnotic and psychedelic works of Caza. For me, he was one of the artists that elevated comics to true Art. And his work spoke to the soul of my generation. So much of my early music was just an expression of being high and inspired on Caza. And what a beautiful, mysterious muse he was for me in those days!"

After years of crafting short stories for *Métal Hurlant*, Caza sought to create a longer series where he could fully explore his themes and characters. The first chapter of *Arkadi and the Lost Titan* was published in France by Humanoids in 1989, the year I took over the company. Caza spent over two decades completing this 528-page saga—a creative and editorial journey that was epic in scope and not without its challenges. He evolved his artistic style ("Look at the evolution of my style over these ten chapters. Like my characters, I've had my descents into hell... and my rises to daylight.") and had to adapt to technical changes. The series was created during a pivotal transition period in European comic coloring techniques—from traditional Full Process Color, used sparingly in the U.S. superhero industry for cost reasons, to digital coloring. The first six chapters of *Arkadi and the Lost Titan* were colored by Caza and his collaborator Scarlett Smulkowski using traditional painting methods, while the remainder was colored digitally. This technical shift complicated the publication of the saga as a whole, with part of it preserved in analog form and the rest in digital. As a result, the collection of the chapters into an omnibus edition was delayed for many years.

After a successful crowdfunding campaign in 2024, driven by the enthusiasm of our backers, the original negative films were recovered and digitized. The pages then underwent a meticulous restoration process under Caza's guidance. For the first time ever, and on the occasion of Humanoids' 50th anniversary, we are able to present Caza's magnum opus in its entirety, as it was meant to be experienced—thirty-five years after the first chapter's release and just as Caza celebrates his 83rd birthday. It is also the first time this material is presented in English, to the delight of its creator, who has often spoken about the importance of American culture in his work ("My graphic culture, both comics and sci-fi illustration, owes a lot to American culture. My Titans, my machine-gods, are the link between classical mythology and the world of superheroes, and my comic book idols are Frank Frazetta, Jack Kirby, and John Buscema.").

I take immense pride in this edition—not only as the most significant work of Caza's career, but also as a testament to the evolution of an artist's craft over time. For the publisher in me, it also brings a satisfying conclusion to a project that once felt like unfinished business.

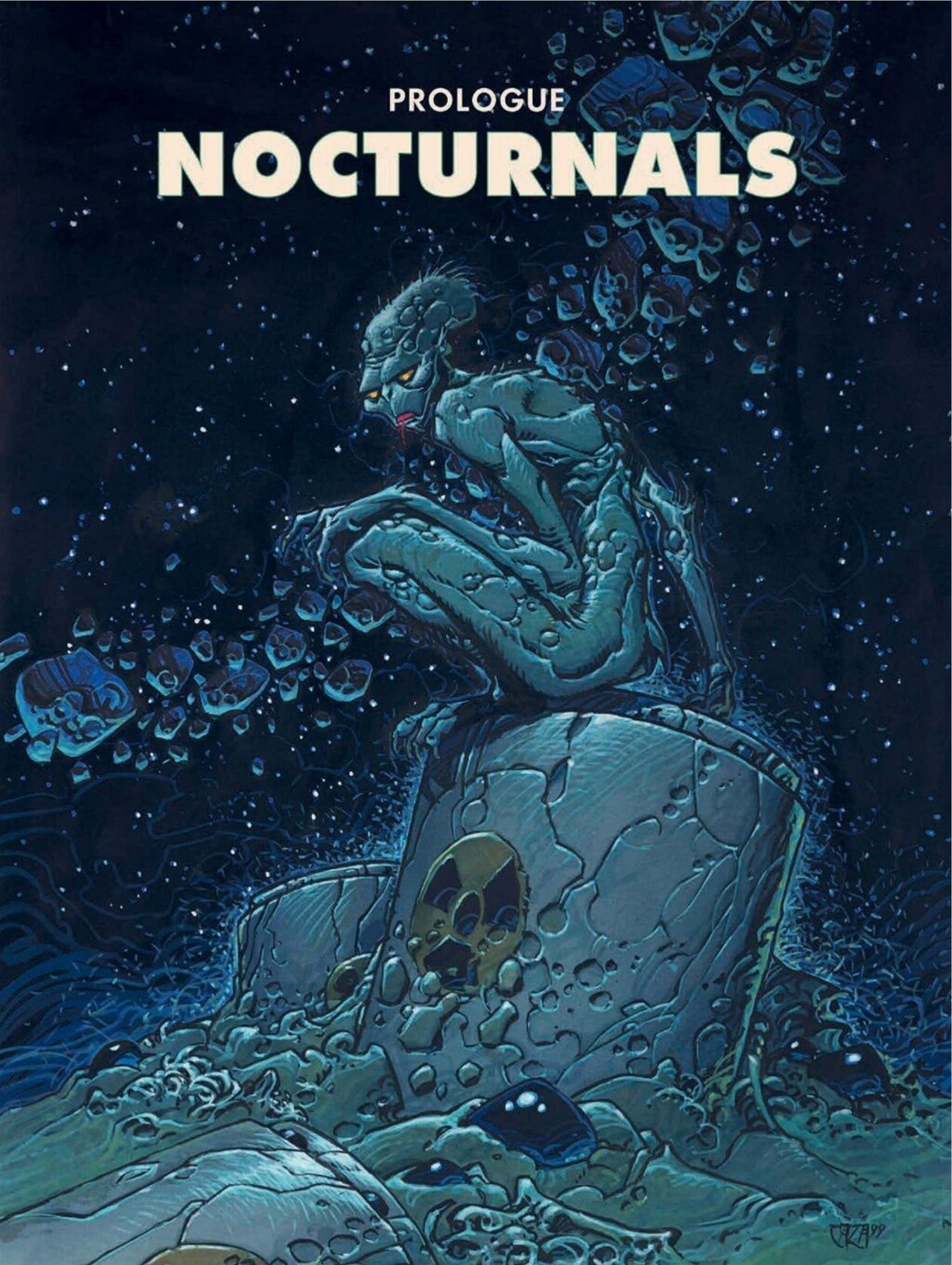
I'll leave the final word to our friend Hans Zimmer: "Now we can truly rediscover and enjoy the precious gift that Caza has given us. Looking at his art takes me back in time, and I quickly realize that it's not back in time at all, but like all great art—a timeless relevance greets us." I couldn't have expressed it better...

Fabrice Giger, Publisher

Los Angeles, Fall 2024

PROLOGUE

NOCTURNALS



EARTH, YEAR 10003 OF *THE STILL ERA*.

EVER SINCE EARTH STOPPED ROTATING ON ITS AXIS, IT HAS BEEN SPLIT INTO TWO OPPOSITE HEMISPHERES: THE *DAY* SIDE, CONTINUALLY SCORCHED BY THE SUN, AND THE DARK ABYSS KNOWN AS *NIGHT*.

OVER THOUSANDS OF YEARS, THE OCEANS' WATER FROZE INTO ICE, BEARING DOWN ON THE DARK CONTINENT AND LEAVING THE REST OF THE WORLD PLAGUED BY DROUGHT.

TRAPPED BETWEEN *NIGHT* AND *DAY*, BETWEEN ICE AND FIRE, A STRETCH OF CREPUSCULAR LAND FORMS A BELT AROUND THE WORLD: *TWILIGHT*. HERE, THE VISIBLE CLASHES WITH THE INVISIBLE--ENDLESSLY.

THIS VAST AREA WITHOUT HOURS OR SEASONS WOULD BE TEMPERATE, WERE IT NOT BATTERED BY THE BLACK WIND THAT BLOWS FROM *NIGHT*.

AND YET IT IS HERE, IN WHAT WERE ONCE DEEP MARINE TRENCHES, IN AN AREA PARTLY SHELTERED FROM THE WIND, THAT LIFE HANGS ON...

SHT!

KEEP YOUR GUARD UP HIGHER, CLUN!

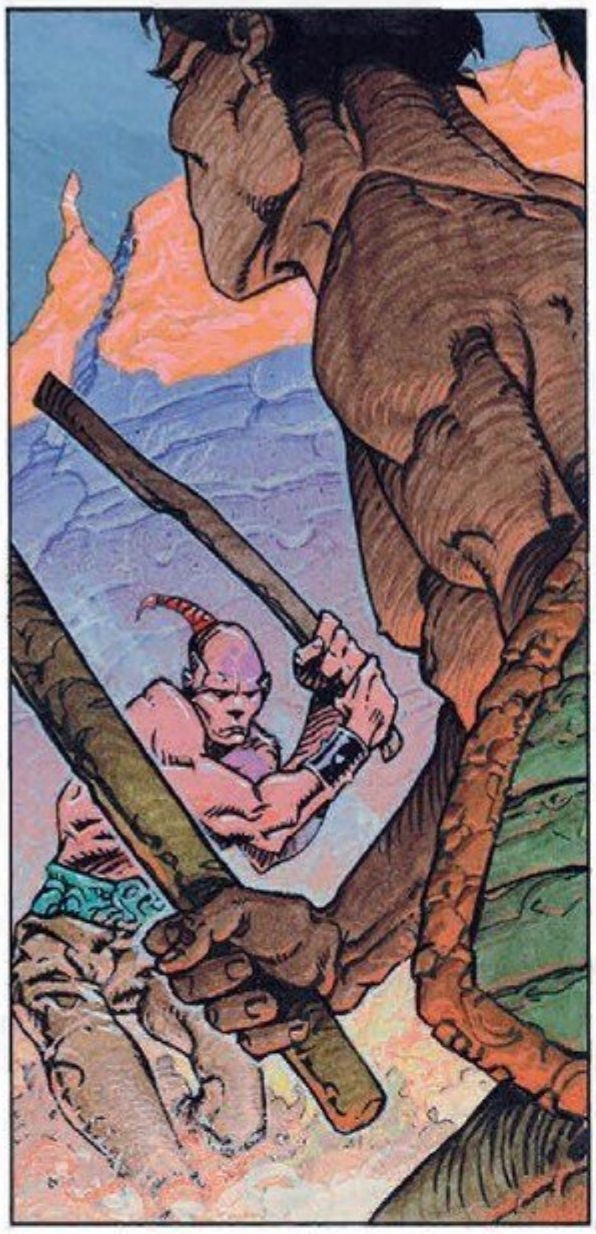
AND WORK YOUR FORM! BOTH OF YOU!

YAAH!

NICELY DONE, ARKAS!

YOU'RE UP, WALRUS!

HA!



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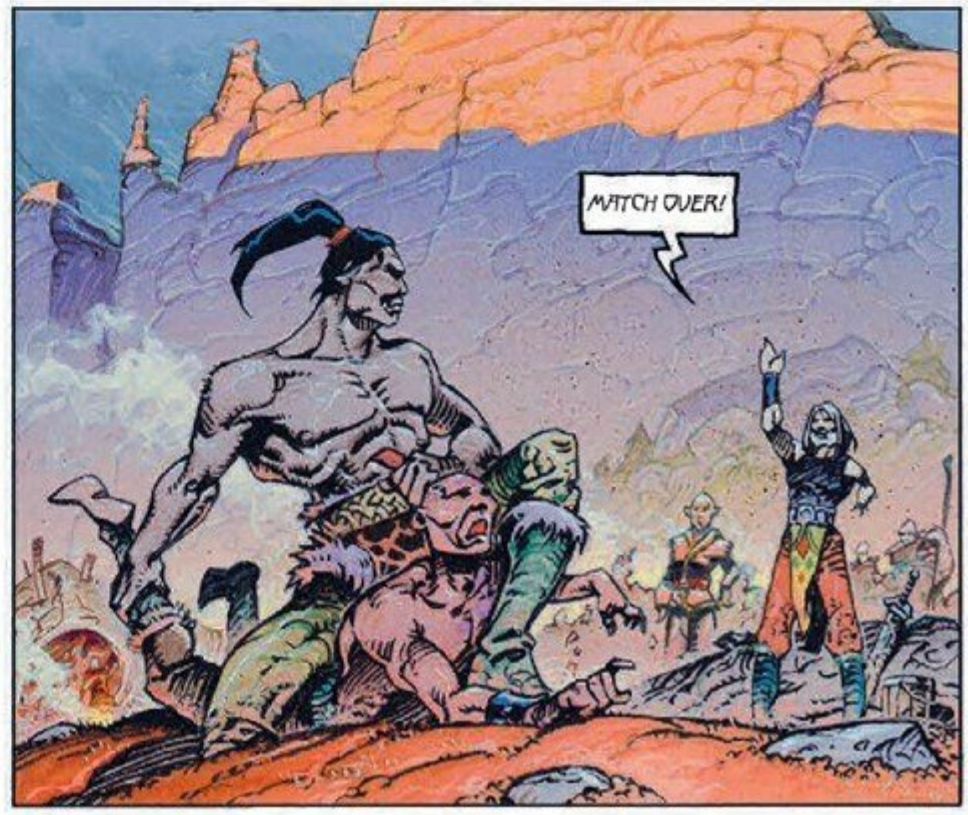
MATCH OVER!

ARKAS IS THE BEST!

GREAT JOB, YOUNG ARKAS!

ARKAS!

DON'T GO YET, ARKAS. I MUST TALK TO YOU.

I'LL SEE YOU LATER, THEN...

FATHER...?

YOU'RE AGILE AND STRONG, SON. YOU'RE PROUD OF YOUR APPEARANCE, OF NOT HAVING A MARK.

BUT THAT DOESN'T MAKE YOU A PURE-BLOOD! BEHOLD YOUR FATHER. THE *CURSE OF RAD* SOMETIMES SKIPS A GENERATION, BUT IT COMES BACK. NO ONE IS SAFE FROM IT. NO ONE!

BUT...ZEUTAN-FATHER--WHAT DOES THE *MARK OF RAD* MATTER?

YOURS HASN'T STOPPED YOU FROM BEING THE GREATEST WARRIOR IN THE BAJNE CLAN.

"WARRIOR," HUH?

WE ARE NO LONGER AT WAR, SON.

IT WAS PRECISELY TO *ESCAPE* WAR THAT WE LEFT THE MOUNTAINS OF AZORES.

WANDERING THROUGH THE DEATH-DEPTHS HAS BEEN HARD ON OUR CLAN.

BUT HERE, AT LEAST WE HAVE NO ENEMIES.

AND SOON, IN GREENEARTH, WE WILL FIND NEW PASTURES FOR THE BAJNES.

WE ARE SURVIVORS.

WE NO LONGER NEED *WARRIORS*, ARKAS. WE NEED *LUMBERJACKS* TO KEEP US WARM, AND *HUNTERS* TO FEED US.

AND *GUARDS*.

GUARDS? BUT WHY, IF WE DON'T HAVE ENEMIES?

WE HAVE NO *HUMAN* ENEMIES. BUT DON'T FORGET... WE TRAVEL ALONG THE EDGE OF *NIGHT*. TOO CLOSE, IN FACT.

YOU'LL BE ON GUARD THIS SLEEP.

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MYRIAM!

WELL? WHAT DID ZEUTAN WANT?

PFF! HE WANTS ME TO GUARD THE HERD!

BUT I'VE GOT TWO ARMS, AND--

AND YOU DREAM OF WARS, CONQUESTS, AND GREAT FEATS...

BUT WHAT WOULD YOU CONQUER, ARKAS? AND WHERE?

THE LIVABLE WORLD IS TINY!

BEYOND THE GREAT BARRIER ARE THE BLACK-WINDS, THE DEATH-ICE... *NIGHT!*

AND ON THE *DAY* SIDE...

...IS THE LAND OF DRAGONS, SAND, AND ASHES. YES, I KNOW!

THE ELDERS GO ON AND ON AND ON ABOUT IT!

BUT HERE, IN *TWILIGHT*, IT'S WORSE. THERE IS *NOTHING!*

THERE'S YOUR FAMILY, YOUR CLAN...AND *ME!*

I'M A FOOL. FORGIVE ME.

YES, YOU ARE A FOOL, ARKAS-THE-GREAT-WARRIOR. BUT YOU'RE THE ONE I LOVE!

THIS SLEEP, I'LL WAIT FOR YOU UP THERE, BY THE CARVED ROCK.

I'M ON WATCH, BUT... I'LL FIND A WAY.

MY FRIENDS!

WE MUST BREAK CAMP SOON. AFTER SLEEP, WE'LL RESUME OUR JOURNEY.

LET US EAT, DRINK, AND PLEASURE OUR WOMEN!

I DRINK TO THE LOVE OF KUNDRY, MY NEW WIFE!

KUNDRY, WHO, THOUGH SHE HASN'T YET GIVEN ME A CHILD, TAKES GOOD CARE OF WIACEK...

THANK YOU, KUNDRY, FOR LOVING MY ONLY SON AS YOUR OWN! YOU ARE AS KIND AS YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL!

HE IS ALL I HAVE LEFT OF JEZABEL, HIS MOTHER--MAY THE BLACK-WIND CARRY HER SOUL TO THE CITY OF NO-RETURN...

YOU'VE EARNED YOUR ROLE AS WIFE OF BERSEK-THE-HAIRY, CHIEF OF THE BAJNE CLAN!

HA! HA! HA!

LET US DRINK!

OY!

OY!

THE BAJNE CLAN.

WE ARE LIKE A HERD, SHIVERING IN OUR SHELTERS MADE OF HIDE...

FEARING NIGHT AS WELL AS DAY, SCARED BY OLD WIVES' TALES!

THE BLACK-WIND BLOWS STRONG AND COLD. WHO COULD EVEN POSE A THREAT?

AND MYRIAM IS WAITING FOR ME...

I HEAR THE WINDS OF TEARS SING!

LISTEN! IT IS THE VOICE OF *NIGHT*--SIGHTLESS MOTHER!--THE VOICE OF THE NAMELESS SPIRITS CRYING OUT FROM DEEP INSIDE THEIR EXILE...

LET US LISTEN TO ABIGAIL, BROTHERS!

WITHOUT THE WORDS OF THE ELDERS, WHAT WOULD WE BE?

WE WOULD BE *LOST!*

WE *ARE* LOST!

WE ROAM THE BANKS OF *NIGHT*--FROZEN MOTHER!--WHERE THE WIND BLOWS COLD!

IT IS THE BREATH OF *RAD*, WHICH CORRUPTS THE BLOOD OF OUR YOUNG AND WITHERS OUR WOMEN'S WOMBS...

IT IS THE BREATH OF *RAD*, WHO BEGOT THOSE WHO WATCH US FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF *TWILIGHT*...

THE PALE HOUNDS OF *NIGHT*! AND ALSO...

THAT WHICH IS WORSE THAN THE HOUNDS...

THOSE THINGS THAT SOMETIMES SLITHER OUT OF *NIGHT*...

THEY SNEAK IN AMONG US TRUE-MEN, AND...

NEVER FORGET, CHILDREN!

WHAT *NIGHT* TAKES, *NIGHT* DOES NOT GIVE BACK! EVER!

AHEM... YOU REMIND US OF THAT AT EVERY SLEEP, OLD ABIGAIL.

AND, AS THEY DO EVERY SLEEP, OUR MEN WILL STAND GUARD!

AND NOW, LET US REST! WHEN WE AWAKE, WE WILL JOURNEY FORWARD.

THE PASTURES OF *GREENEARTH* AWAIT US!

ARKAS, YOU CAME!

OF COURSE! HOW COULD I RESIST THE CHARMS OF SWEET MYRIAM?

BUT... YOU LEFT YOUR BEARSKIN BEHIND...

FEAR NOT, I AM NOT COL--

ER... I AM, IN FACT! I'M FREEZING!

HOLD ME TIGHT!

HEE! HEE!

COME!

THE CHIEF SAID...

...TO EAT, DRINK...

...AND PLEASURE OUR WOMEN.

...

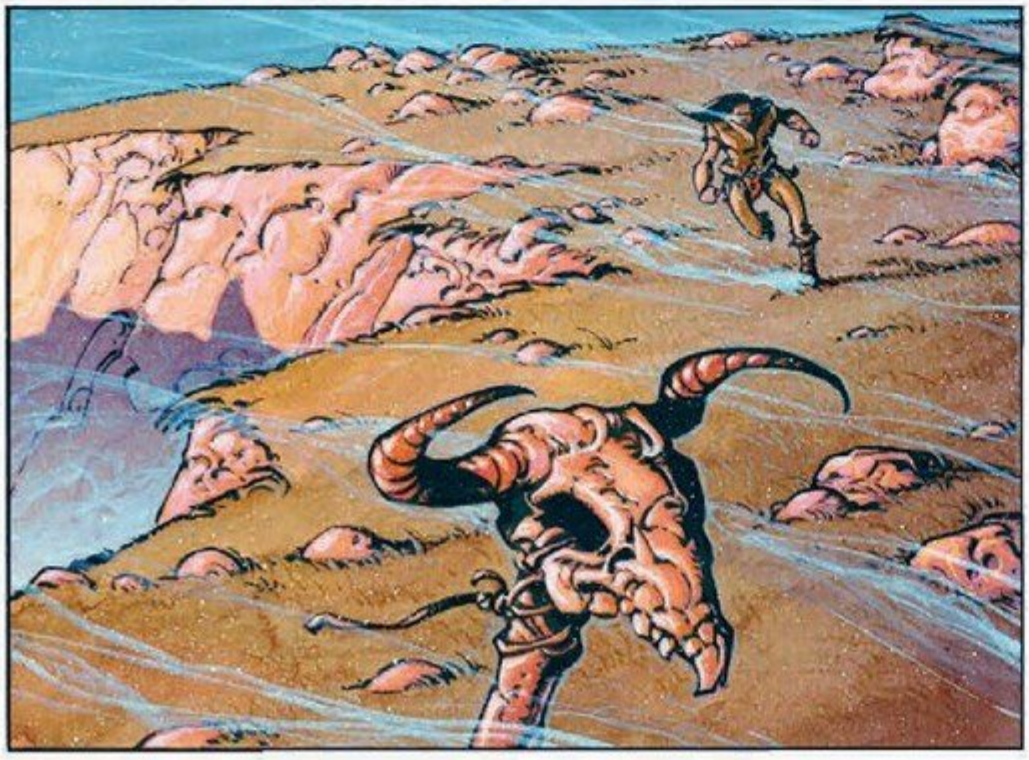
THE OLD SHAMAN WOMAN, ABIGAIL... SHE CLAIMS THAT IN ANCIENT TIMES, BEFORE THE STILL ERA, THE EARTH USED TO ROTATE ON ITS AXIS.

NIGHT WOULD END AND MORNING WOULD COME, THEN DAY, THEN EVENING... AND NIGHT AGAIN. OVER AND OVER...
NOW THERE IS ONLY DUSK, HERE IN THE LAND OF EVENING LONG...

MMH... I...
ARK!

AS!
ASHES OF RAD!!
THE CAMP! SOMETHING'S WRONG!

AND I'M ON WATCH!!



THERE HE IS!
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YOU CALL YOURSELF A WARRIOR! YOU THINK YOURSELF STRONGER THAN EVERYONE ELSE! BUT YOU ABANDONED YOUR POST! AND YOUR WEAPONS!

AND WHILE YOU DID...

...THE HOUNDS OF NIGHT CAME!

THEY TOOK WIACEK, SON OF BERSEK!

OUR CHIEF'S ONLY SON! DO YOU HEAR ME?!

AND KUNDRY... KUNDRY-THE-FAIR HAS GONE LOOKING FOR HIM!

OUR CHILDREN DIE YOUNG, OUR WOMEN STRUGGLE TO GIVE BIRTH, AND NOW YOU'VE COST US A MOTHER AND A CHILD!!

HOW SHALL I PUNISH YOU, FORMER SON OF MINE?!

HOW DARE YOU?!

EVERYONE KNOWS THAT WIACEK IS A HALFWIT AND THAT KUNDRY IS STERILE!

HOW DARE YOU SAY SUCH A THING, YOU DESPICABLE DOG?! YOU HAVE BETRAYED THE BÄJNE CLAN!

THIS SLEEP, YOUR CHIEF LOST HIS SON AND HIS WIFE BECAUSE OF YOU!

I... GIVE ME BACK MY WEAPONS AND MY BEARSKIN, AND I'LL GO LOOK FOR THEM!

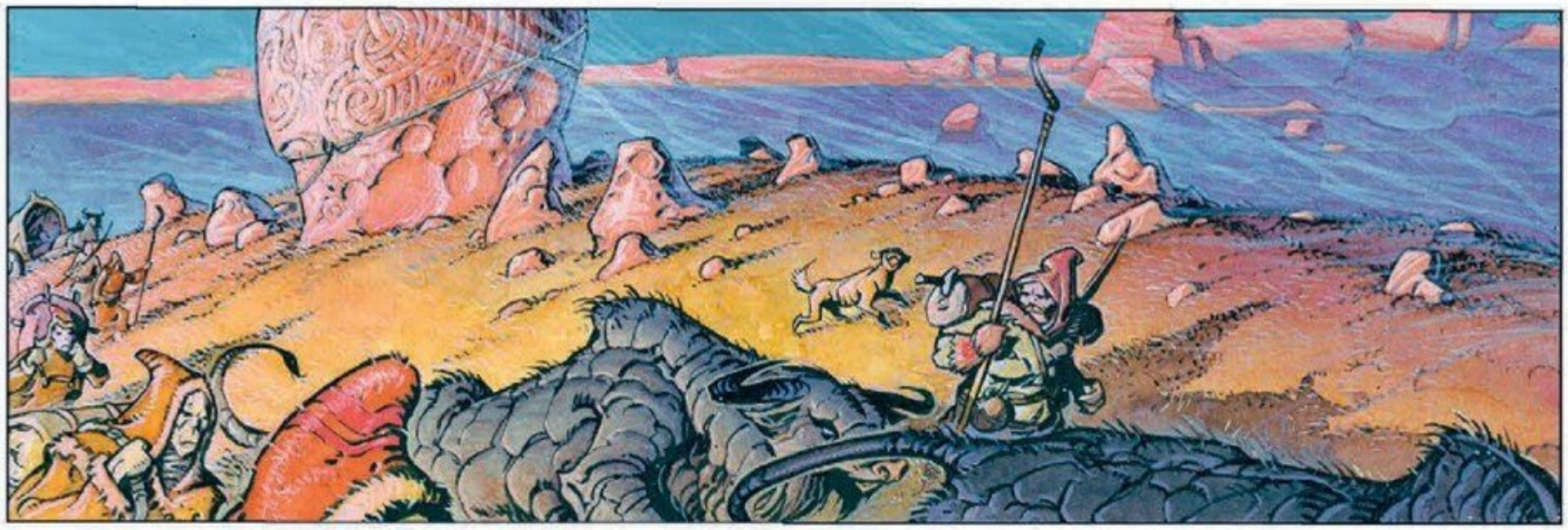
INSIDE *NIGHT*?

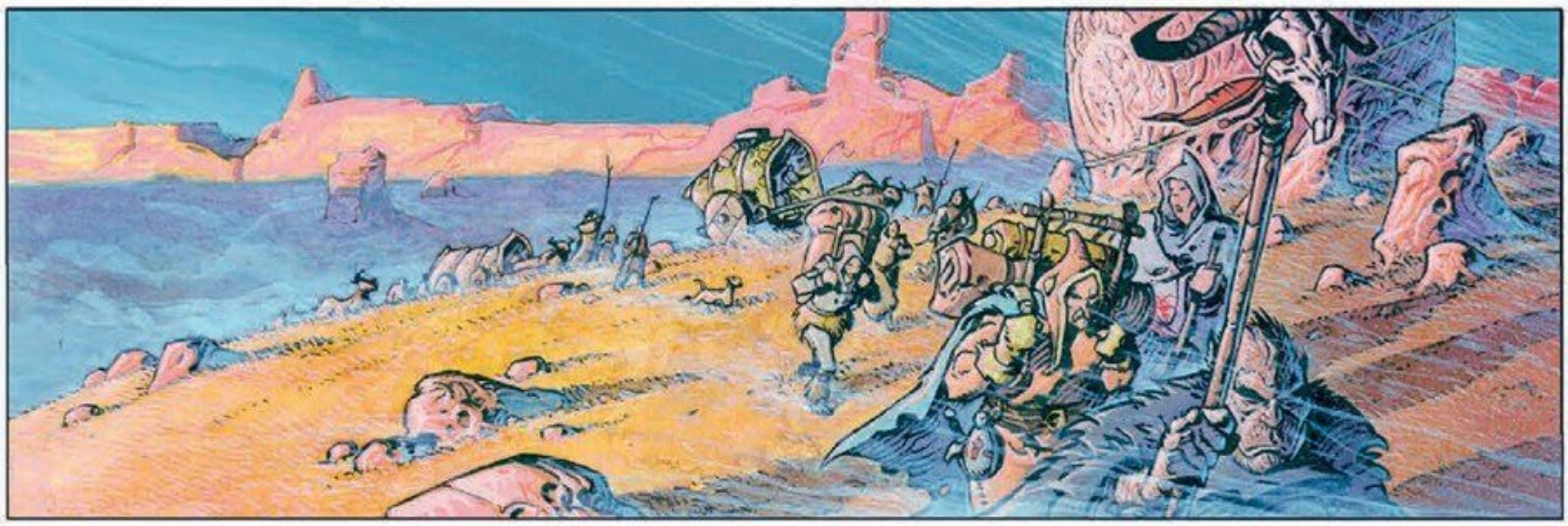
WHO HERE HAS EVER HEARD OF ANYONE RETURNING FROM *NIGHT*?! NO TRACE OF ANYONE TAKEN BY THE HOUNDS OF *NIGHT* IS EVER FOUND... ONLY BONES SCATTERED BY THE BLACK-WIND!

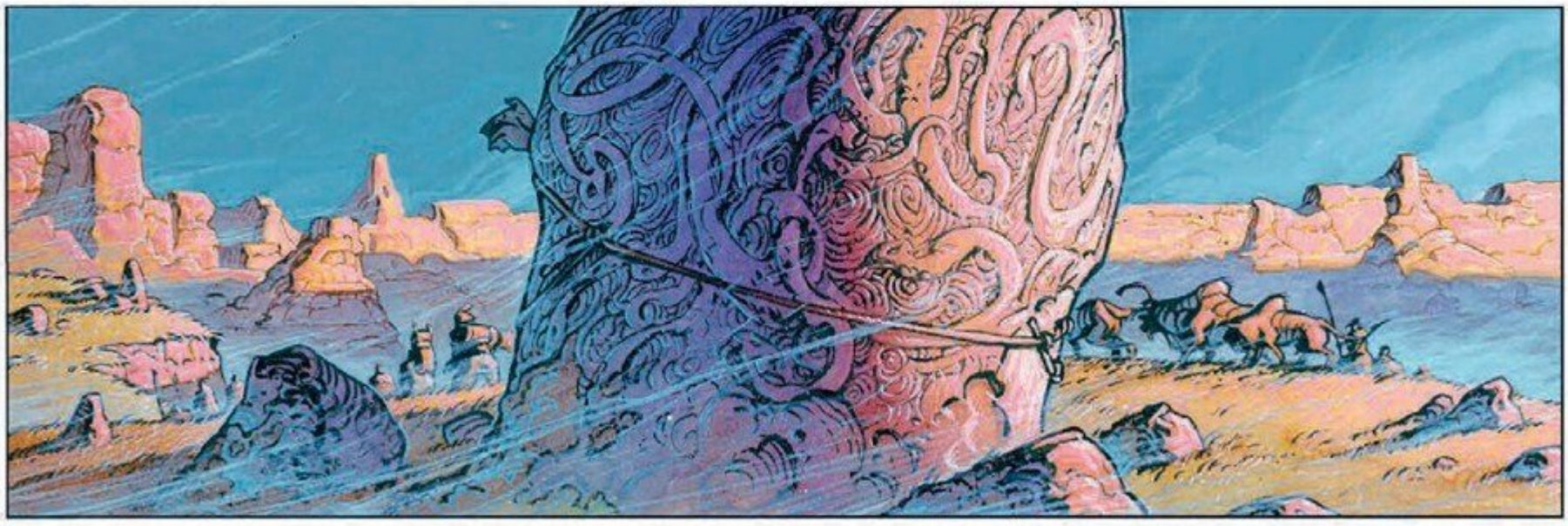
NO, YOU WILL NOT GO INTO *NIGHT*. NOT YOU, NOT ANYONE!

WHAT *NIGHT* TAKES, *NIGHT* DOES NOT GIVE BACK...

...EVER!







GONE...

BERSEK, ZEUTAN, THE OLD SHAMAN...

...AND MYRIAM!

LEFT HERE, ON THE EDGE OF NIGHT.

FACING THE BLACK-WIND. AND THE COLD.

YOU WAIT.

YOU KNOW THAT SOON, THIRST WILL COME. THEN HUNGER.

BUT YOU DON'T WAIT FOR DEATH. NO.

YOU WAIT...

...FOR STRENGTH!

WOOOOH...

WOOOOOH!...

WAIH!

YOUR CRIES WON'T HOLD THEM BACK FOR LONG.

YAH!

THEIR RAGE HAS WHIPPED THEM INTO A FRENZY...

...AS HAS YOURS!

AND NOW, AT LAST...

...COMES STRENGTH!

RARGH!

MYRIAM?!

YOUR WEAPONS, ARKAS!

STEP ASIDE!

THEY'RE GIVING UP...

DO YOU STILL PLAN TO SEARCH FOR THE WOMAN AND THE CHILD INSIDE *NIGHT*, ARKAS?

I'VE BROUGHT YOUR WEAPONS, YOUR PELTS, AND ANIMAL FAT.

YOUR BEARSKIN...

WITH THIS, I'LL GO ALL THE WAY INTO THE BOWELS OF *NIGHT*, MYRIAM!

GO REJOIN THE CLAN. I DON'T WANT THEM ACCUSING YOU, TOO. I'LL BRING THEM BACK, I SWEAR!

IF NOT, MY OWN BONES WILL BE THE ONES THE BLACK WIND BLOWS BACK HERE!

FURTHER INSIDE NIGHT...

KUNDRY.

WIACEEEK!

WIACEEEK!

NOOOO!

EAT FLESSSH...

FLLLESSHHHH...

HUNGRY...

MOOORRRE...

PUURE BLOOD...

WAAARM...

HERE, FLESH!

LEAVE THE WARM WOMAN!

SHAMBLE...

SHAM_BLLLE_

NHHH_

FEAST ON HOUNDS, AS HOUNDS DONOT ON PURE-MEN!

THIS ONE_IS MINE!

NNNH!

OOOOURS

WARM WOMAN. OURS!

AND SO, YOU, TOO, PASSED INTO THE UNDERSIDE OF THE WORLD...INTO THE LAND OF NO RETURN.

NOT AS A LOST TRAVELER, BUT AS A HUNTER. AGAINST THE WIND.

YOU ENTERED NIGHT THROUGH THE FOREST OF DEEP SLEEP, LAND OF A THOUSAND PETRIFIED GIANTS...

KUNDRY!

KUNDRYY!

...AND TEN THOUSAND ECHOES...

HERE, EVEN NAMES GET LOST.

!

THE SKY...

HAD THEY NOT TOLD YOU ABOUT THAT THING IN THE SKY?

THE RING-MOON. FRAGMENTS OF AN ANCIENT SATELLITE, WITH A BRIGHT SIDE AND A DARK HEART, THAT SHATTERED WHEN THE EARTH STOPPED SPINNING.

ROCKS THAT CONTINUE TO WANDER ABOUT THE SKY...

AH!

...AND SOMETIMES...

...FALL!

AHHH!!

MOON-
STONE...

JO...

WOOZH!

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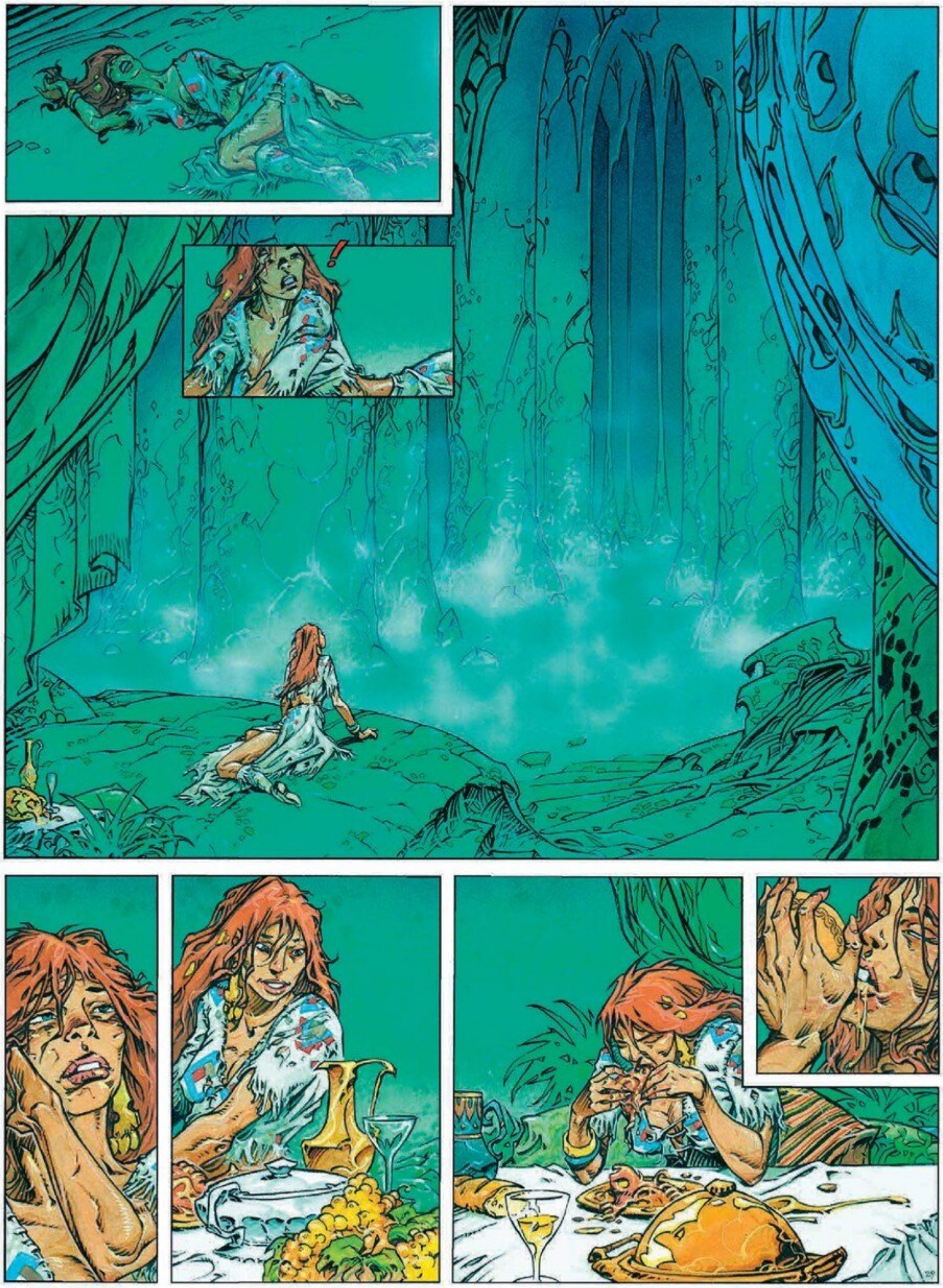
...LIGHT!



YOU HAVE COME INTO MY NIGHT, WARM WOMAN...

...INTO MY PALACE TRAPPED IN ICE...

...MY TEMPLE OF TIME SUSPENDED...

...INSIDE MY CASTLE OF LEAD.

YOU HAVE ENTERED MY SILENCE...

...TO HAUNT MY DREAM OF ICE...

...AND DRINK FROM ITS DARKNESS...

PRINCE!

MY NAME IS SHAMBLE.

YOURS IS NO MORE.

ENTER THE INVISIBLE, WARM WOMAN.

HERE AT LAST IS THE LAND BEYOND THE BLACK-WIND, THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH, THE TRENCH OF DARK LIGHT...

HERE DWELL THE SPECTERS.

THERE IS SOMETHING IN THE AIR HERE... IT IS NEITHER A SCENT NOR A SOUND... NOR A COLOR...

THERE IS NOTHING TO HEAR, BUT THE BONES CREAK: *NIGHT* IS FEASTING.

IT IS A THOUGHT, BUT IT REEKS: COLD, ROTTING DREAMS, LIKE THE NIGHTMARES CORPSES HAVE IN THEIR VAULTS.

THE STENCH OF *RAD!*

AND THEN...

TRACKS!

NOT HUMAN...

THE HOUNDS OF *NIGHT?*

OR... "THAT WHICH IS WORSE THAN THE HOUNDS"?

STALE SCENT -- RESIDUE...

ROTTED-BLOODS!

ASHES OF RAD! THE KID!! ALAS!

I TARRIED TOO LONG!

"NO TRACE OF ANYONE TAKEN BY THE HOUNDS OF NIGHT HAS EVER BEEN FOUND... ONLY THE BONES SCATTERED BY THE BLACK-WIND!"

INSIDE YOUR HEAD... THAT FROZEN WAVE... THAT THOUGHT THAT REEKS...

THAT IS OUR VOICE.

SO IT WASN'T THE HOUNDS...

IT WAS THEM... US... THE NOCTURNALS.

THE..."NOCTURNALS?"

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THAT MAKE FOR THE CHILD?

WHY DO YOU CARE?

FLESH NOURISHES THE FLESH. HOPE NOURISHES DESPAIR.

ENDLESSLY THE ABYSS DEEPENS...

HUNGER...

WHAT ABOUT...HER?

THE WARM WOMAN?

THE CHILD WAS MERELY BAIT. USED TO TRICK MY HOUNDS.

SHE WAS THE REAL PREY!

SHE IS MINE NOW. GIVE UP!

NEVER!

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FATHER, GUIDE MY ARM!

GIVE ME..

..STRENGTH!

AVENGE!

THE STENCH HAS LEFT MY MIND.

THESE NOCTURNALS... IT IS REAL FLESH AND BONE THAT MY SWORD STRIKES!

THEY ARE JUST MEAT, LIKE US...

SPOILED MEAT!

ANOTHER SCENT!

RED HAIR...

KUNDRY-THE-FAIR!

AH...

CAZA'11

KUNDRYYY!

ASHES OF RAD!

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KUN-
DRY!!

LADY
KUNDRY!

WIFE OF BERSÉK, I
AM HERE TO RESCUE
YOU! COME!

CAN YOU HEAR ME,
KUNDRY-THE-FAIR?
I AM ARKAS, SON OF
ZEUTAN, FROM THE
BAJNE CLAN!

HEAR MY WORDS!
BERSÉK AWAITS YOU!

BERSÉK..?

I..

YOU..

TELL THE HAIRY ONE
THAT I LIKE IT HERE.

AN ANGEL OF THE COLD HAS
BRANDED ME WITH HIS MARK..

SHAMBLE,
PRINCE OF THE
NOCTURNALS..

HE HAS TAINTED ME... DEEP INSIDE.

BUT HE DRAPED ME IN VEILS OF ICE... ADORNED MY BODY WITH BLACK STONES! MADE ME DRINK THE PALE WIND OF *NIGHT*...

NOW LEAVE ME!

I HAVE FEASTED ON THE FLESH OF DARKNESS... AND *NIGHT* HAS DEVOURED ME.

I HAVE ENTERED THE INVISIBLE...

I DWELL IN THE SHADOWS NOW...THERE IS SOMETHING HERE... *MEANING*... IT IS BEAUTIFUL...

IT IS *NIGHT!*

KUNDRY! HE HAS BEWITCHED YOU!

LEAVE!

LEAVE HERE OR DIE, WARM-BLOODED MAN! FORGET HER! SHE MEANS NOTHING TO YOU!

GO AWAY!

BUT SHE IS MY QUEEN!

DON'T HARM HIM, O SHAMBLE, MY PRINCE... HE IS BUT A CHILD...

LEAVE HER BE, SPECTER!

BAO!

NOCTURNAL!

YOUNG FOOL!

WARM LITTLE MAN...

MEN FROM BEYOND TWILIGHT...YOU CALL US SPECTERS...AND BEASTS... AND NOCTURNALS...

...AND IN TRUTH, THAT IS INDEED WHAT WE ARE!

BORN OF *NIGHT* AND OF RAD'S ASHES, WE LOATHE DAY...

THE LIGHT OF THE SUN, ITS WARMTH, ITS FIRE... O PAIN! O SULFUR!

WE DRAW OUR STRENGTH FROM *NIGHT*... FROM THE UNFATHOMABLE OBSCURITY OF *NIGHT*...

...AND FROM ITS IMMEASURABLE DESPAIR.

AND YET...

AND YET OUR EYES BEHOLD ALL THE GLORY OF THE HEAVENS!

RAD!

REMEMBER...

WHAT NIGHT TAKES, NIGHT DOES NOT GIVE BACK...

...EVER!

I COULDN'T STAY WITH THE CLAN. NOT WITHOUT YOU. I HAD TO..

MYRIAM!

OH, ARKAS! I KNEW YOU WOULD COME BACK!

I HAVE RETURNED FROM NIGHT, YES... DEFEATED.

I DIDN'T BRING BACK THE CHILD. OR THE MOTHER.

I HAVE FAILED.

NO.

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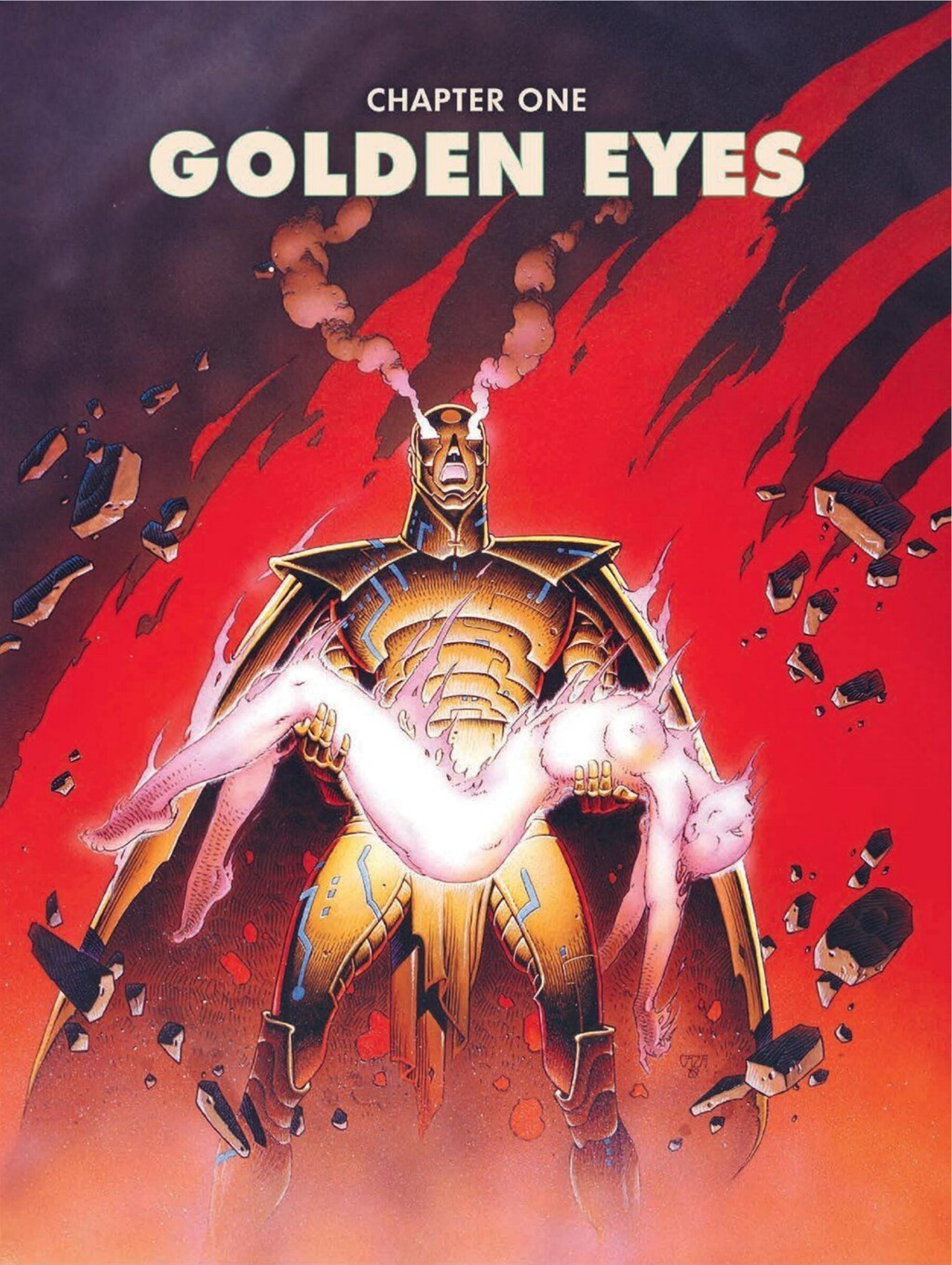
AND SO, ARKAS AND MYRIAM LEFT THE BÄJNE CLAN. THEY BUILT A HOUSE OF STONE NOT FAR FROM THERE, AT THE FOOT OF THE GREAT BARRIER, IN TWILIGHT, IN THE LAND OF EVENING LONG.

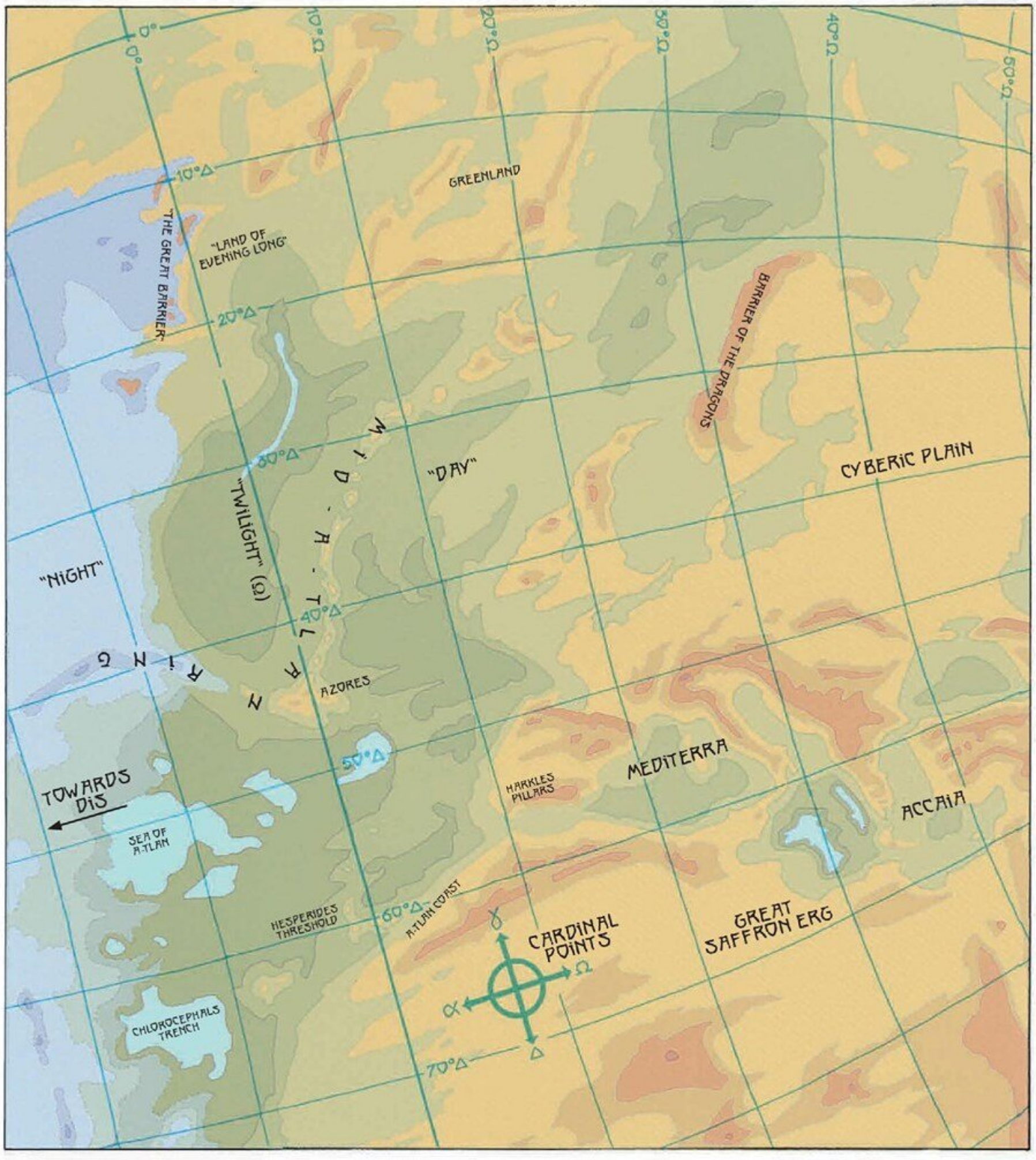
LATER, VLAD WAS BORN. HE BORE THE SAME MARK AS ZEUTAN, FATHER OF ARKAS.

AS FOR THE WOMAN WHO LOVED A NOCTURNAL, KUNDRY-THE-FAIR, WHOM THE CLAN BELIEVED TO BE STERILE, SHE GAVE BIRTH TO A HALF-HUMAN, HALF-WOLF.

CHAPTER ONE

GOLDEN EYES





CURB LEVELS
ELEVATION IN *METS*

LAND

0 M
- 1000 M
- 2000 M
- 3000M

ICE

LAND

±4000 M
±3000 M
±2000 M
±1000M
0M

ICE

THE LEVEL 0 REPRESENTS SEA LEVELS BEFORE *THE STILL ERA*

FOSSIL SEAS (- 3000M)

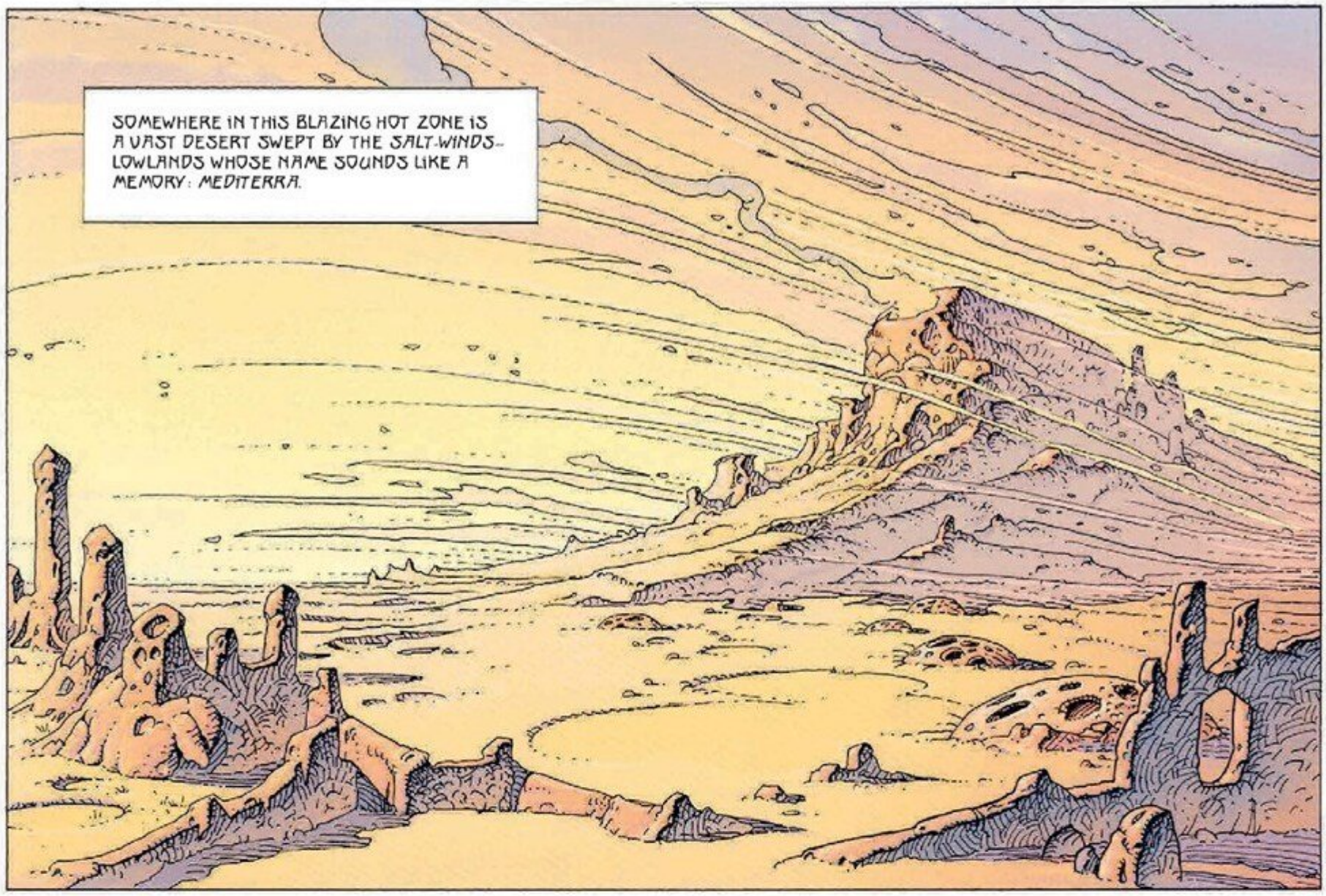
EARTH-YEAR 10020
OF *THE STILL ERA*.

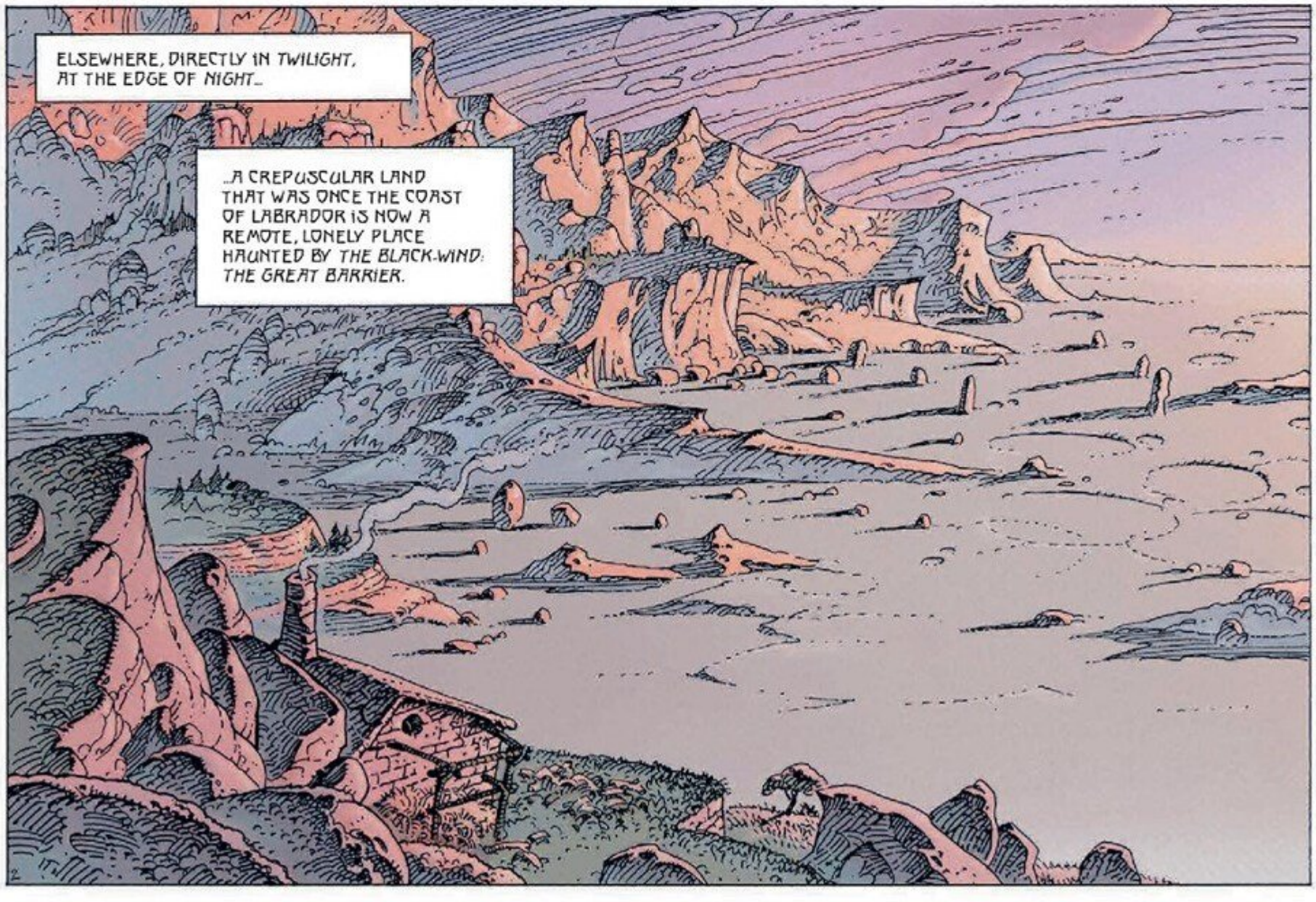
LONG AGO, THE MOON ORBITED EARTH, ALWAYS KEEPING ONE SIDE FACING THE PLANET. NOW, AND FOR THE PAST TEN THOUSAND YEARS, IT IS EARTH THAT KEEPS ONE SIDE PERPETUALLY TURNED TOWARDS THE SUN. THIS IS *THE STILL ERA*. EARTH IS FIXED IN A PERMANENT POSITION.

AS FOR THE MOON, IT FRACTURED INTO FRAGMENTS THAT NOW FORM A RING SIMILAR TO THAT AROUND SATURN. IT IS THE *RING-MOON*, ALSO KNOWN AS THE *CHAINS OF KRO-NO*.

THIS IS THE DARK SIDE OF THE WORLD, CALLED *NIGHT*. THE LAND OF ICE AND COLD. THE LAND OF *MYSTERY* AND WEEPING...

THE BRIGHT SIDE OF EARTH IS *DAY*, OF COURSE... THE LAND OF LIGHT AND FIRE, AND JUST AS DEADLY WHEN ONE VENTURES BEYOND THE LONGITUDE OF 40° Ω (OMEGA).


SOMEWHERE IN THIS BLAZING HOT ZONE IS A VAST DESERT SWEPT BY THE *SALT-WINDS*-- LOWLANDS WHOSE NAME SOUNDS LIKE A MEMORY: *MEDITERRA*.


ELSEWHERE, DIRECTLY IN *TWILIGHT*, AT THE EDGE OF *NIGHT*...
...A CREPUSCULAR LAND THAT WAS ONCE THE COAST OF LABRADOR IS NOW A REMOTE, LONELY PLACE HAUNTED BY *THE BLACK-WIND*: *THE GREAT BARRIER*.

A STREAK OF LIGHT IN THE SKY...

...HE'S MOVING AGAINST THE WIND...

LISTEN, RESIDENT OF DIS, WHO DREAMS, BENT OVER YOUR SCREEN_LISTEN AND BEHOLD: OR-PHE

WALKS IN DARKNESS AND THE SKY OPENS UP AS HE GOES... HE SEES, HE HEARS, HE FEELS, HE

TOUCHES, HE TASTES... OR-PHE EXPLORES *THE GREAT EXTERIOR* WITH THE SOLE AIM OF BRINGING YOU IMAGES,

SOUNDS, SMELLS, MELODIES, SCENTS... BEHOLD: ON *DELTA CENTAURI*, HE WITNESSED A MOUNTAIN OF CRYSTAL

ERUPT OUT OF AN EMPTY OCEAN... ON THE WORLD CALLED *PRAIRIE*, HE BREATHED IN, EVERY

I DIED TWENTY YEARS AGO...

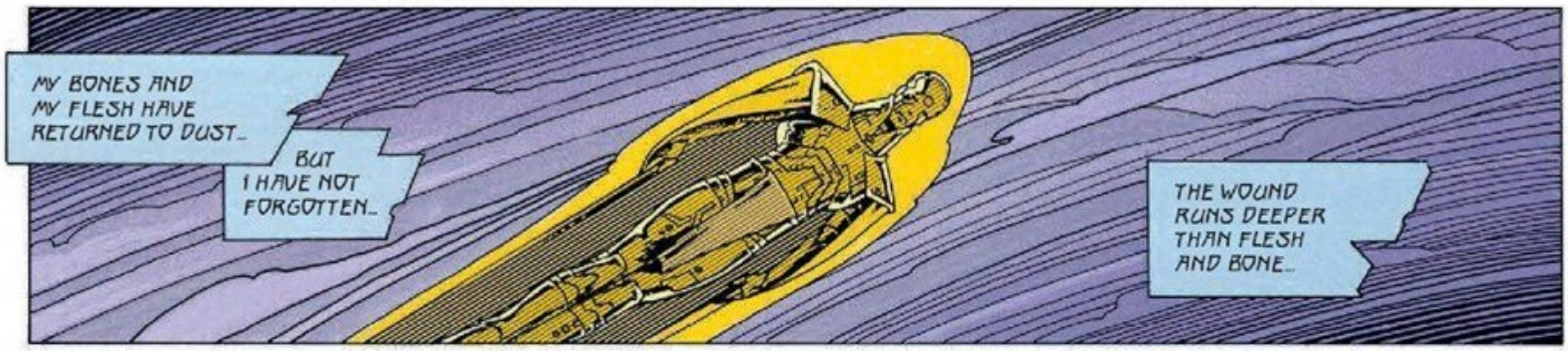
DAWN, THE SCENTS OF TEN THOUSAND FLOWERS... (BUT OF COURSE, YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT

DAWN IS--OR A FLOWER)... ON *SCRIABIN-ALPHA*, HE RECORDED THE INDECISIVE POLYPHONY OF A

METHANE WATERFALL... ON *AMARANTE*, THE SLOW MUSIC OF A SLANTING DESERT... ON *WINDY-KATE*,

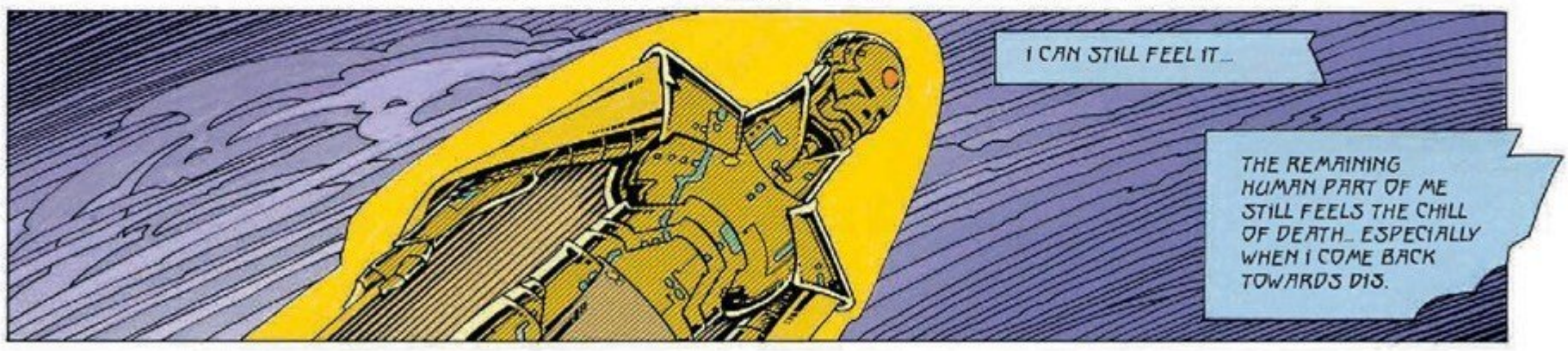
THE MELANCHOLY VOICE OF A TREE WITH A THOUSAND MOUTHS... (IT SINGS. THE ECHO THAT RESPONDS HOWLS).

ON *DENEB-ENTYDRE*, HE EXPLORED AN ARTIFICIAL CAVE, EXCAVATED AND SETTLED BY A RACE



GONE EXTINCT THREE MILLION YEARS AGO... HE LOVINGLY CARESSED THE METALLIC FUR

THAT COVERS THE WALLS. CAN YOU FEEL THAT CARESS, THE WAY OR-PHE FELT IT? FOR YOU, HE LISTENED

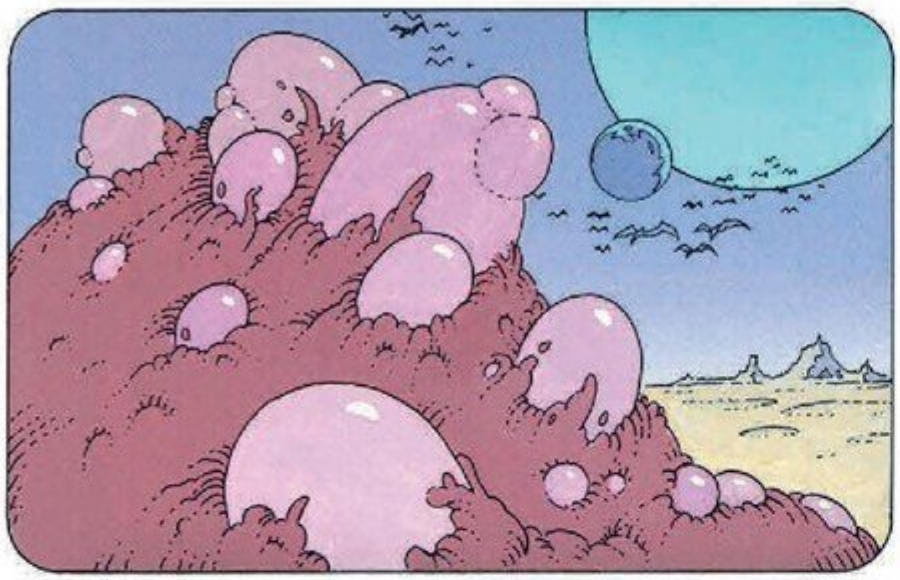


TO THOSE SONGS, CAPTURED THOSE IMAGES, THOSE FLAVORS, THOSE SCENTS... HE'S COMING BACK. BRINGING YOU THE CRY

I MOVE AGAINST THE WIND...

AS I DO EACH TIME I RETURN...

OF THE WILD ISLANDS, THE COLORS ON THE RING OF A NEWBORN SUN, THE EPHEMERAL NECTAR OF



THE TWO-HEADED FRUIT, THE FLESH OF THE WHITE DWARVES... AND THEN THE DEEP SONG OF THE WAVES, CAPTURED

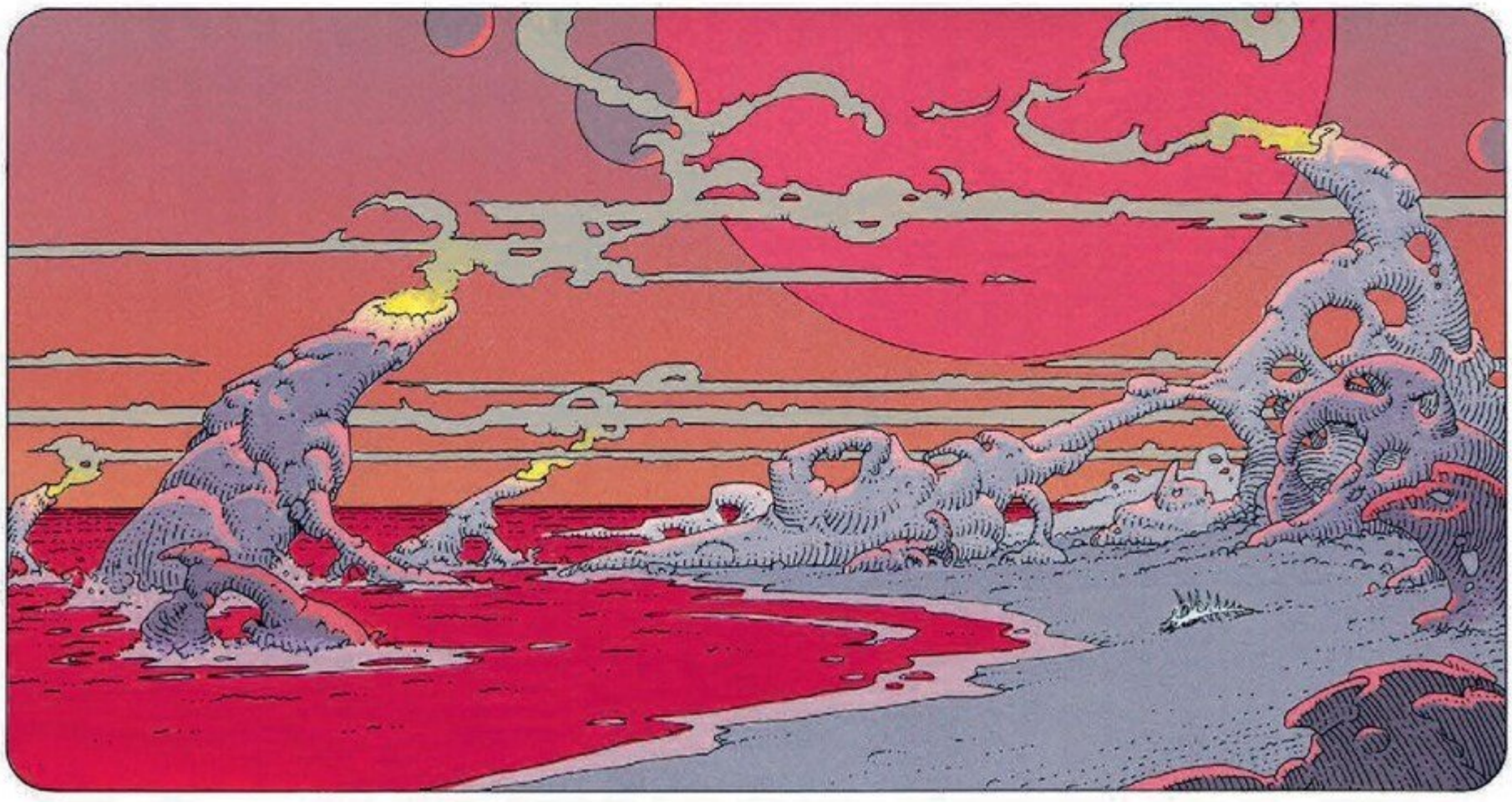
FOR ONCE AGAIN...

I AM BACK.

I BELONG TO DIS. TO ITS PEOPLE.

AND TO HEL

IN A SEASHELL ADRIFT ON A BEACH OF SOOT, ON THE SHORE OF A SEA OF BLOOD, ON A PLANET



WITH NO NAME, UPON WHICH SHINES AN ANCIENT SUN...

I AM OR-PHE, THE LAST POET, AND I BRING SAMPLES TO THE CHOSEN.

OM-6

OM-6
OM-6

OM-6
OM-6
OM-6...

YES, HEL?

OM-6, OR-PHE IS BACK.

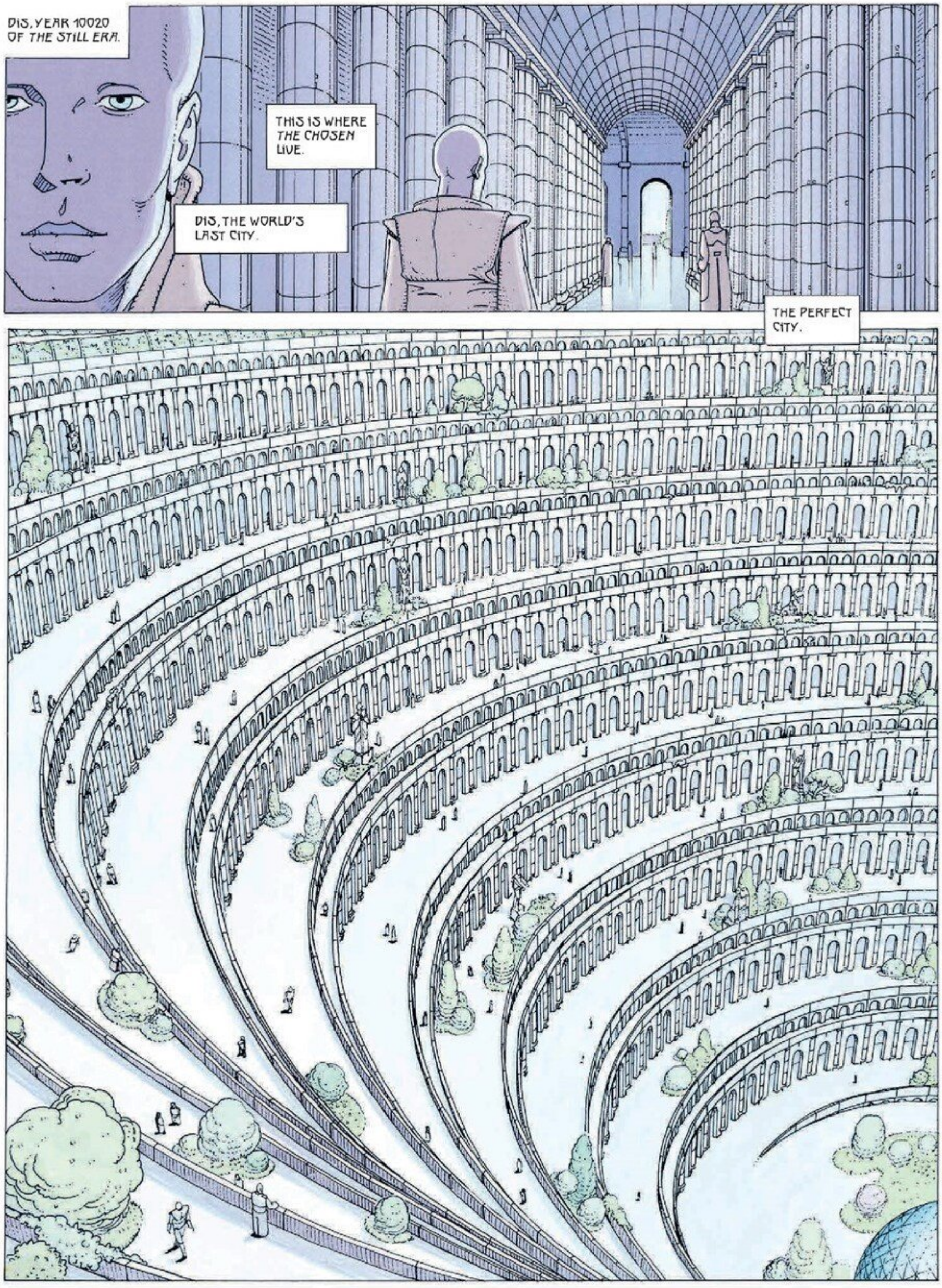
THANK YOU, HEL.

DIS, YEAR 10020
OF *THE STILL ERA*.

THIS IS WHERE *THE CHOSEN* LIVE.

DIS, THE WORLD'S LAST CITY.

THE PERFECT CITY.



HERE, ALL HUMANS ARE BEAUTIFUL, IMPERVIOUS TO DEFECTS AND DISEASE.

SHELTERED FROM THE DANGERS OF *THE GREAT EXTERIOR*, FED, DRUGGED WHEN ANXIOUS...

...LULLED BY SYNTHETIC MELODIES...

...THEY LIVE BLISSFULLY, WITH NO PAST AND NO FUTURE.

THE CHOSEN DO NOT PRAY, BUT THEY WORSHIP HEL.

HEL, THE MOTHER OF ORDER AND THE LAW, THE OMNISCIENT SOVEREIGN, A SERVANT DEVOTED TO THEIR PERMANENT BLISS.

HEL, DIS' MAIN COMPUTER...

...WHO ALSO HAS HER OWN SERVANTS: ROBOTS, CYBORGS, ELECTRONIC ANGELS-- GOD-MACHINES...

...WHICH *THE CHOSEN* CALL...

...THE *TITANS*.

THE TITANS...

ONE RARELY RUNS INTO THEM ANYMORE, UNDER THE COVERED SKY OF DIS.

BUT THEIR IMAGES ADORN THE INTERIOR TERRACES AND THEIR EXPLOITS FLASH ACROSS *THE CHOSEN'S* DREAM-SCREENS.

THERE IS PRO-ME, THE MOST POWERFUL, A COLOSSUS MADE OF METAL WHO, EVERY HUNDRED YEARS, FLIES TO THE SUN'S RING, GATHERS IN HIS STEADY HANDS A BLOCK OF MOLTEN PLASMA IN FUSION...

...THEN BRINGS IT BACK AND PLACES IT BETWEEN THE MAGNETIC GRAPPLE HOOKS OF DIS' DOME.

(*AT WHICH POINT THE CHOSEN RETIRE TO THEIR ALCOVES, AS THEIR PALE EYES CANNOT WITHSTAND THE SIGHT OF THE LIGHT BEARER.*)

AND THUS, *NIGHT* NEVER FALLS UNDER THE DIS SKY-- *EVER.*

IN BETWEEN HIS MISSIONS, PRO-ME COOLS DOWN IN *THE GREAT EXTERIOR.*

FOR 100 YEARS.

THERE ARE MANY OTHER TITANS...

HE-FAS-TUS, MASTER OF METALS AND ENERGY... GARM, THE GUARDIAN OF THE REALM... A-TLAN, BEARER OF THE SKY... OKE-AN, PURVEYOR OF WATER...

...AND OTHER, MORE SECRET ONES...

...WHO STAY IN THE EXTERIOR.

THE ONLY ONES ROAMING THE LONG CORRIDORS ARE ANONYMOUS TITANS, PURELY MECHANICAL SERVANTS TASKED WITH THE MATERIAL CHORES OF QUOTIDIEN LIFE.

AND THEN...

...THERE'S...

OR-PHE!

OR-PHE...

TELL ME...

TELL ME ABOUT THE GREAT EXTERIOR!

THERE'S NOTHING TO TELL, OM-6!

IT'S ALL BEEN RECORDED!

GO LOOK AT YOUR DREAM-SCREEN... LISTEN TO THE AUDIO FILES... PLUG YOUR SENSORS IN...

BUT OR-PHE... THOSE ARE JUST IMAGES...

YOU HAVE SEEN, HEARD, AND TOUCHED WITH YOUR HANDS!

"SEEN, HEARD AND TOUCHED"? HOW COULD YOU SAY THAT, OM-6?!

AS MY SERVANT, YOU KNOW WHAT I AM...

A TITAN!

A CYBORG, OM-6! A CYBORG!

OM-6! MY EYES ARE CAMERAS... MY EARS ARE MICROPHONES, MY HANDS ARE SENSORS...

I CAN'T SEE ANYTHING, I CAN'T HEAR, TASTE, TOUCH, OR FEEL!

NOTHING!

"SEE," YOU SAY, OM-6? AH, YES... IF ONLY I COULD... SEE.

I DON'T HAVE A BODY, OM-6... NOTHING BUT AN ADVANCED CYBERNETIC HUSK AROUND MY HUMAN BRAIN... THE ONLY PART OF "ME" THAT'S...ME.

WELL THEN, TAKE ME WITH YOU NEXT TIME, ORPHE!

SO I CAN SEE! SO I CAN TOUCH!

YOU KNOW I CAN'T. WHAT IF...

HEL...

HEL WON'T FIND OUT!

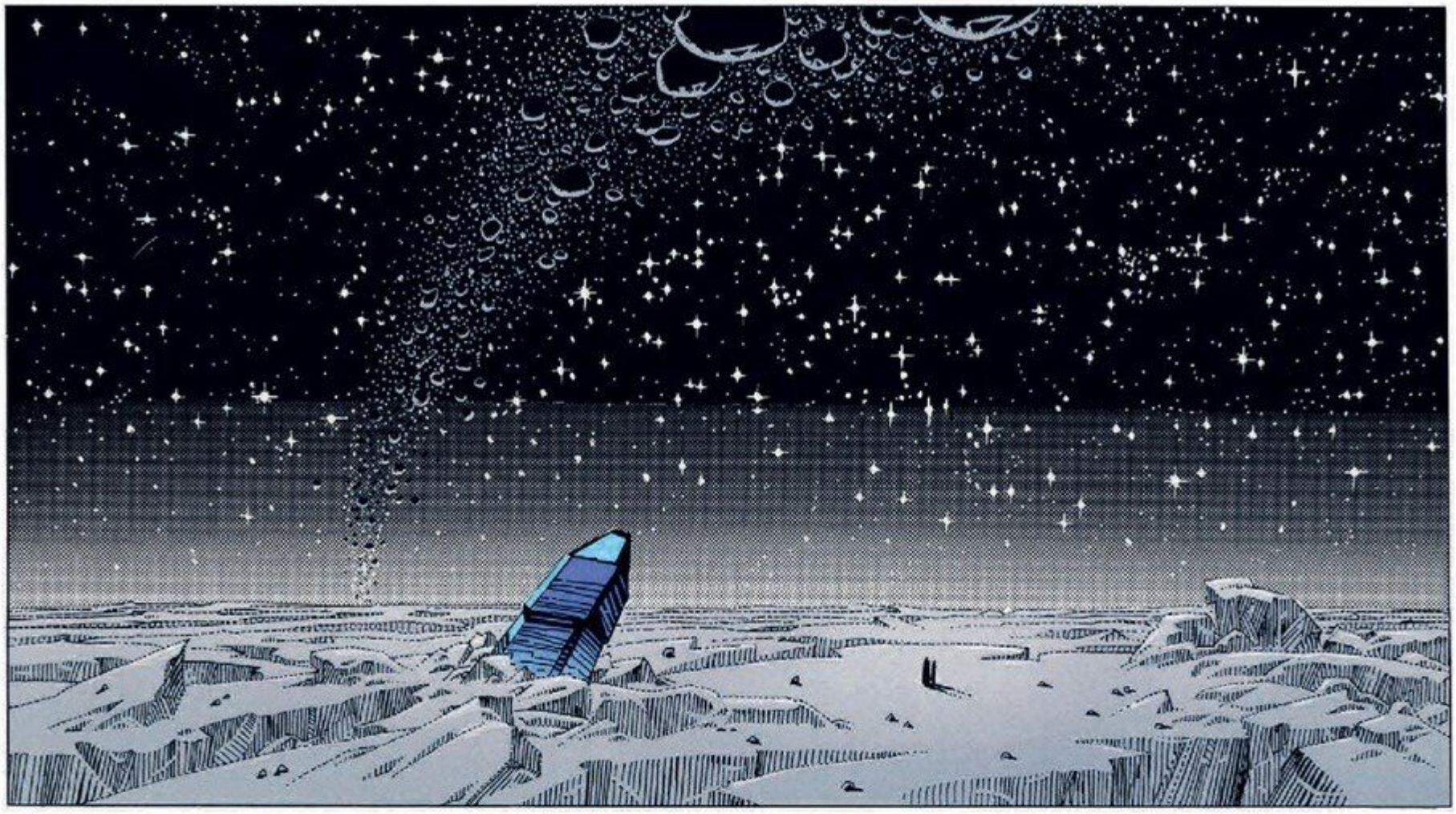
PLEASE, ORPHE! JUST THIS ONCE!

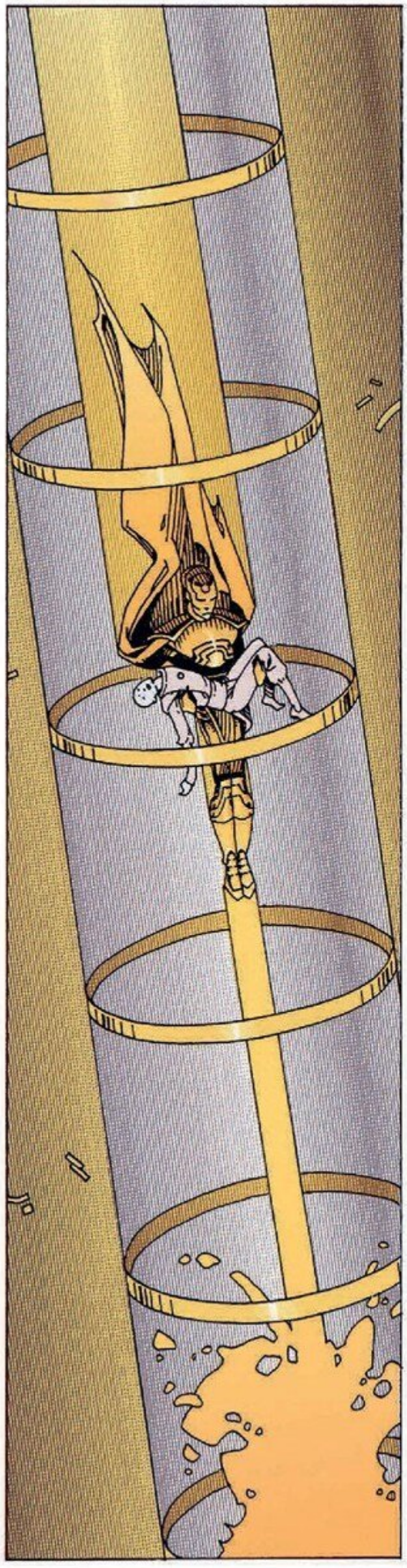
CHILD, OF COURSE HEL WILL FIND OUT. THE GODS ARE PROGRAMMED TO KNOW EVERYTHING.

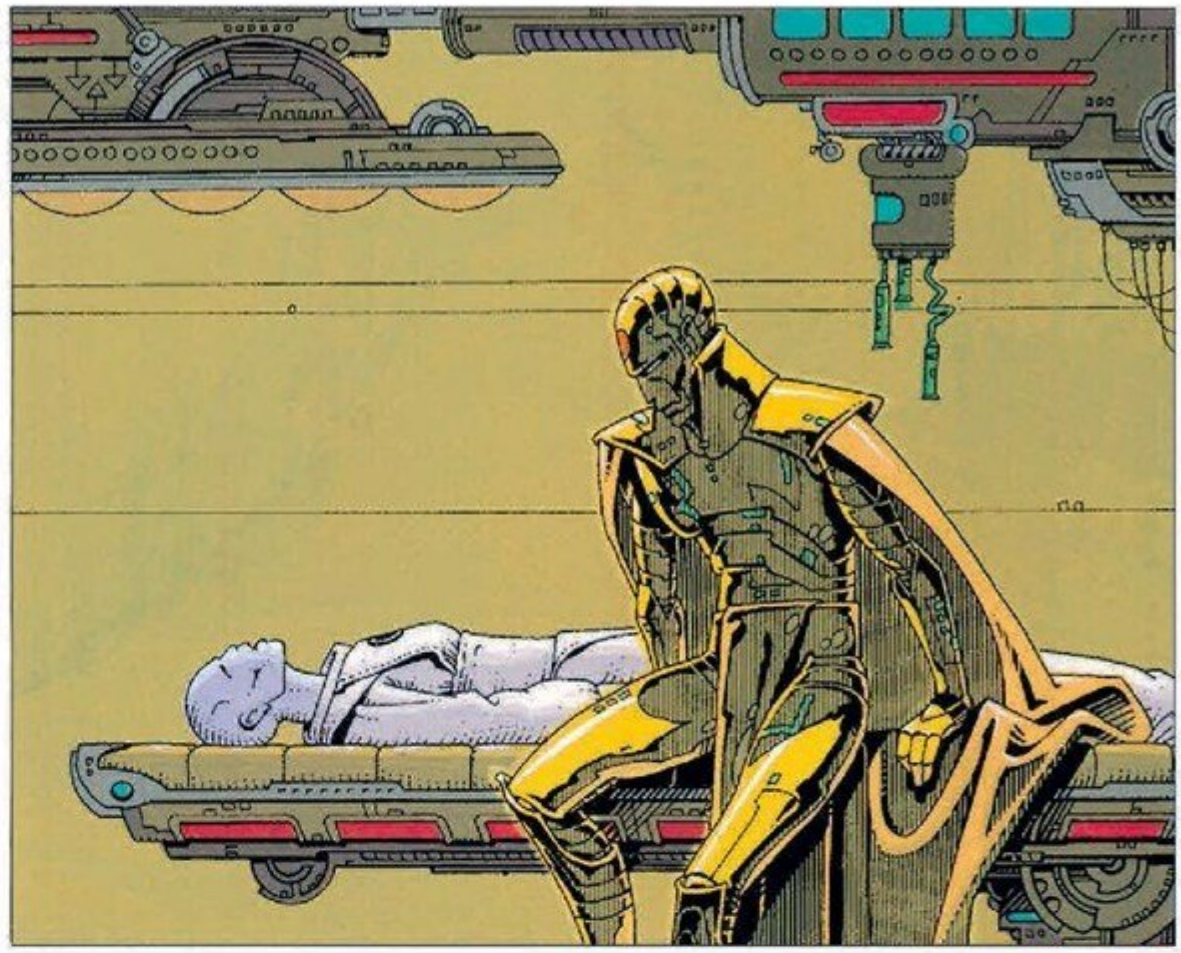
BUT...

...THEN AGAIN...

COME!







OR-PHE...
THAT WORLD YOU TOOK ME TO...
WHERE WAS IT?
SUCH A BEAUTIFUL, TERRIFYING PLACE...

IT WAS MERELY EARTH, OM-6...
OUR EARTH.

DIRECTLY ABOVE DIS.

OR-PHE!

YES, HEL?

YOU KNEW IT WOULD HURT HIM.

TO SEE THE SKY?

YES.

WHY DID YOU DO THAT?

BECAUSE OF THE WAY HIS EYES LIT UP.

I DON'T UNDERSTAND.

I DIDN'T EXPECT YOU TO UNDERSTAND.

..COMPUTER.

SUCH IS THE LIFE OF THE GOD-MACHINES AND *THE CHOSEN* IN DIS, THE CITY THAT DREAMS IN THE MIDDLE OF *NIGHT*.

FAR FROM DIS.

SOMEWHERE IN *TWILIGHT*, AT THE FOOT OF *THE GREAT BARRIER*.

ARKAS HAD BEEN TO *NIGHT* A LOT.

HE HAD EXPLORED IT DEEPLY.

AND IT HAD MOVED HIM DEEPLY IN RETURN.

THEN HE HAD SETTLED THERE, IN EXILE, WITH MYRIAM (WHO, IN THOSE DAYS, COUNTED HER CYCLES TO KEEP TRACK OF TIME).

VLAD WAS BORN, WITH THE SAME DEFECT AS ARKAS' FATHER (THE *MARK OF RAD* WAS EVERYWHERE, EVEN IN THOSE OF THE PUREST BLOOD).

BUT THEN, THE HOUNDS OF *NIGHT* HAD TAKEN MYRIAM'S LIFE.

FOR ARKAS, TIME HAD STOPPED THERE, IN *THE LAND OF EVENING LONG*.

YEAR 10020.

MYRIAM WAS THE ONE WHO CALLED THIS PLACE "THE LAND OF EVENING LONG." SHE LOVED THE MELANCHOLY OF ENDLESS DUSK.

THE SUN WAS JUST WARM ENOUGH FOR US TO GROW A FEW CROPS. ENOUGH FOR THE TWO OF US...

...AND VLAD.

THE GREAT BARRIER WAS THERE TO PROTECT US FROM NIGHT...

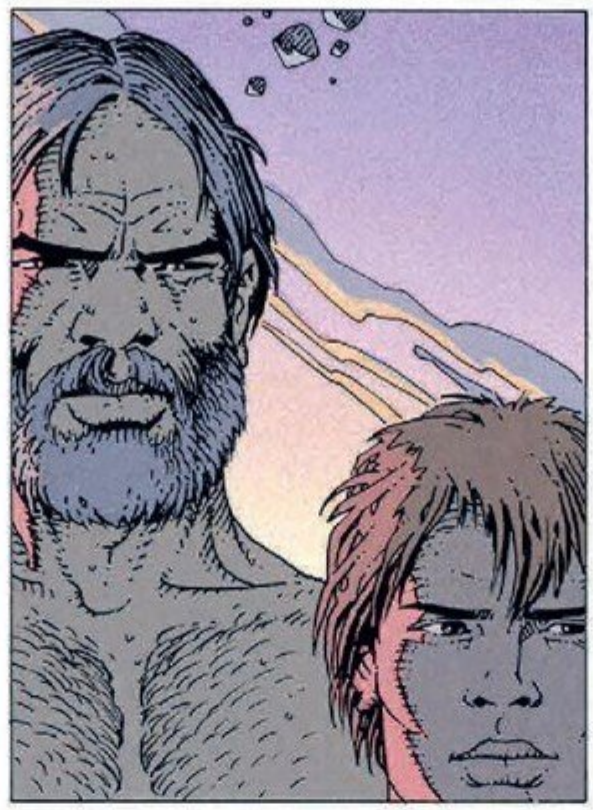
BUT THE GREAT BARRIER HADN'T PROTECTED MYRIAM.

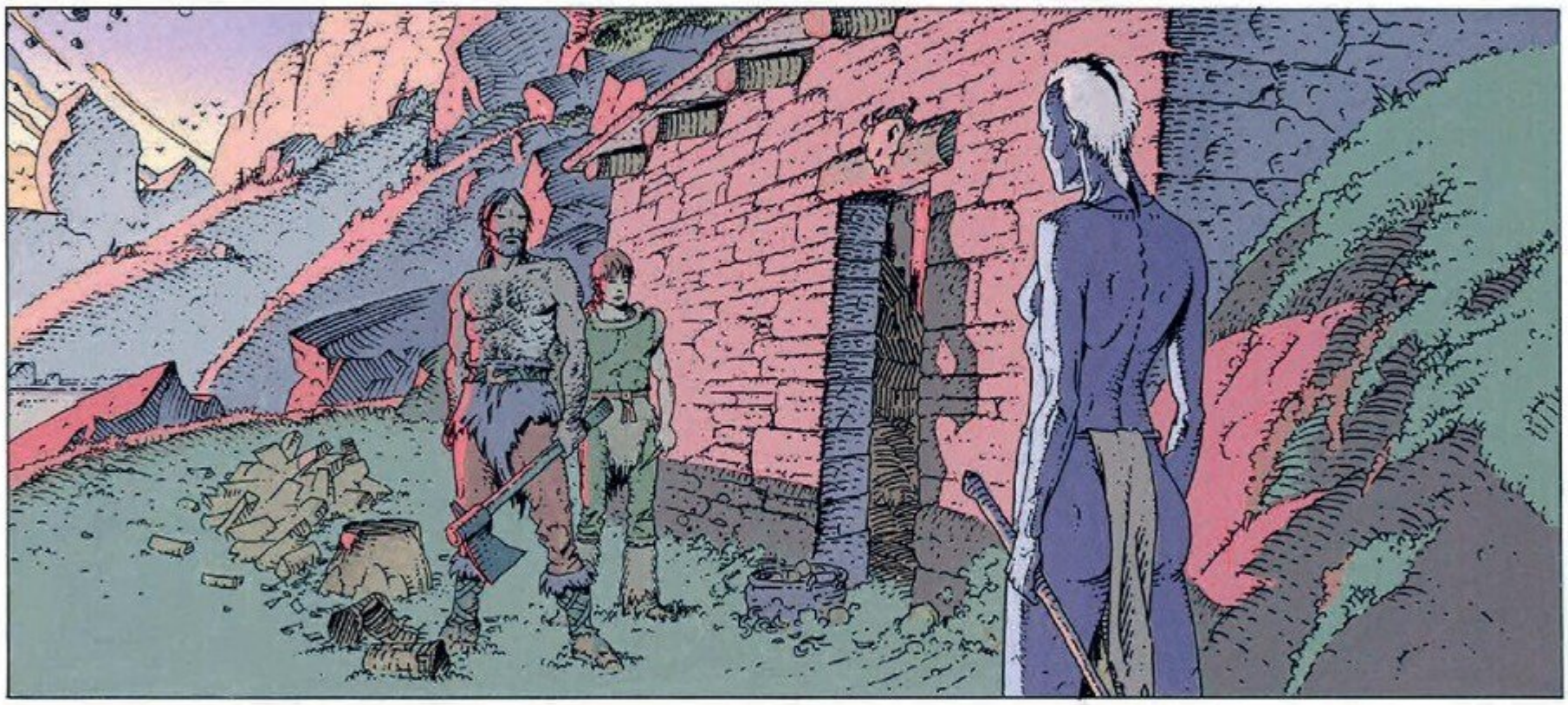
SOMETIMES, THE SKY OPENS UP AND THE RING-MOON APPEARS IN ALL ITS GLORY OF ROCK AND ICE CRYSTALS.

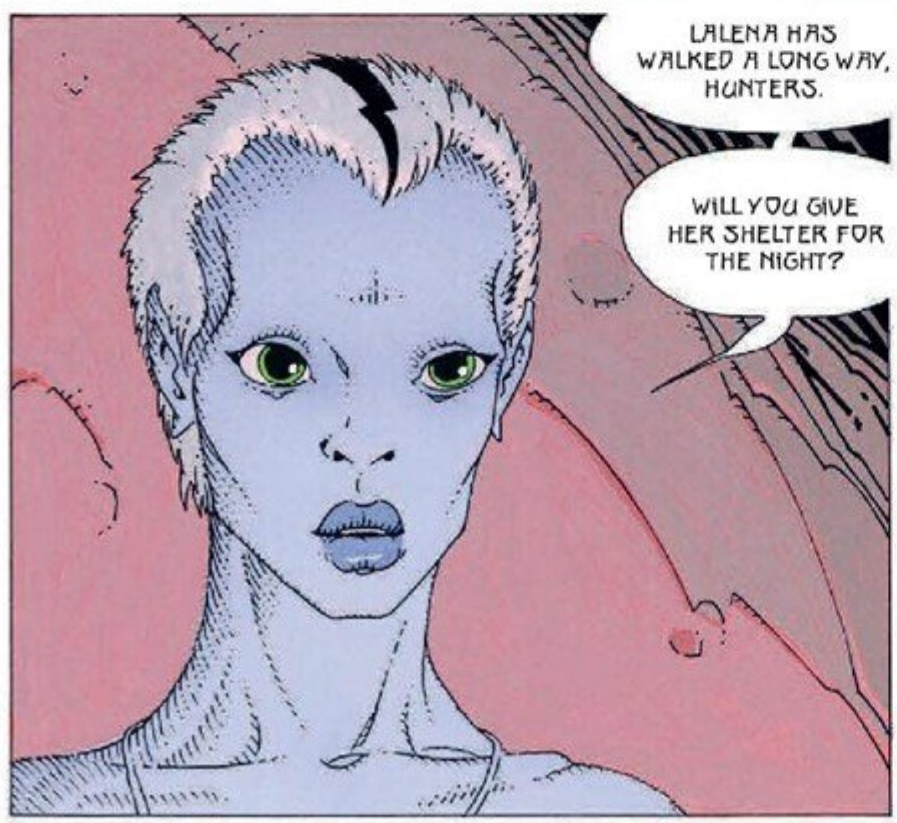
WHEN THAT HAPPENS, SOME OF THE COLD OF NIGHT CREEPS INTO OUR HOME...

ARKAS... FATHER!

SOK!






LALENA HAS WALKED A LONG WAY, HUNTERS.
WILL YOU GIVE HER SHELTER FOR THE NIGHT?

ONE MUST ALWAYS TAKE IN A PASSING TRAVELER.
VLAD, WATER AND CLAY!

FEAR NOT, STRANGER. VLAD KNOWS MANY REMEDIES.

I KNOW THIS SCENT... THE SCENT OF WOMAN, YES, BUT ALSO...SOMETHING ELSE... SOMETHING OLDER...AND COLDER.

I...I'LL LIGHT THE FIRE BACK UP.

LALENA ISN'T COLD, MAN-FATHER.

IN FACT... SHE HAS ONLY EVER WORN...

_THIS MOONSTONE.

HERE, LITTLE MAN! FOR YOU.

"MOONSTONE_"

THE STRANGER SHOULD REST NOW.

I'M OFF TO HUNT.

THERE IS NO NIGHT IN THE LAND OF EVENING LONG...

THERE IS ONLY EXHAUSTION AND HUNGER TO TELL YOU WHEN TO GO BACK...TO EAT...AND SLEEP...

ARE YOU NOT EATING, STRANGER?

HER NAME IS LALENA, FATHER.

LALENA WILL EAT... BUT LATER...

...AND DREAM

Wóaoooooo
OOOOOOWWLLLL
OO

HOOWW

WHOOOW

WOO

OOOWW

VLAD?

I HEAR IT, ARKAS... I HEAR--

LET ME SEE...

THE STRANGER?

YES...

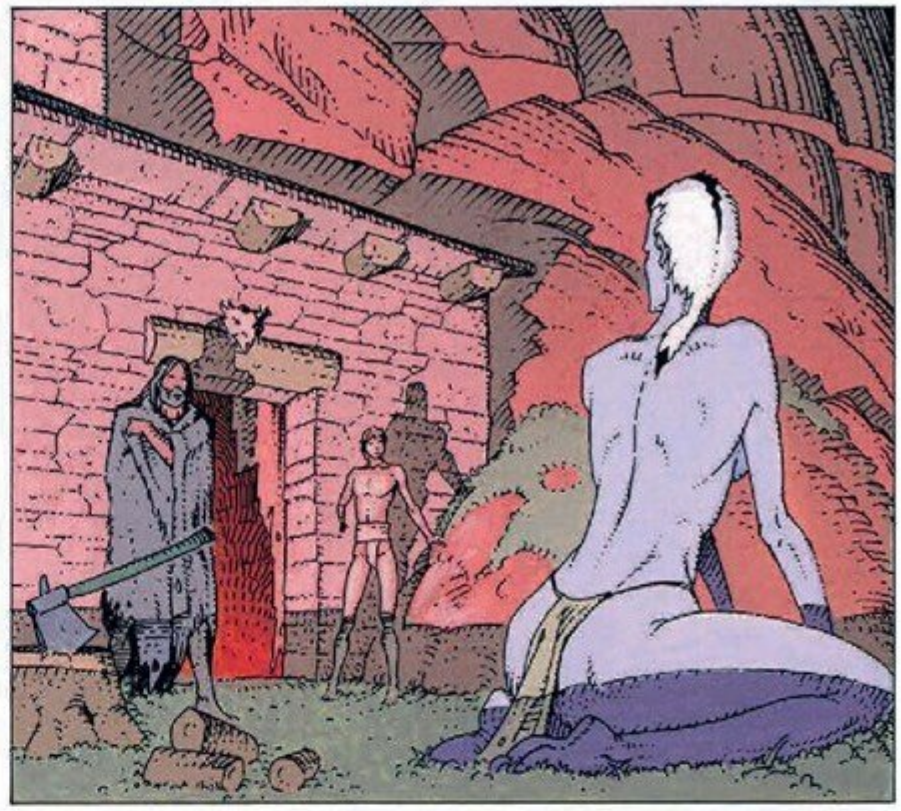
LALENA!

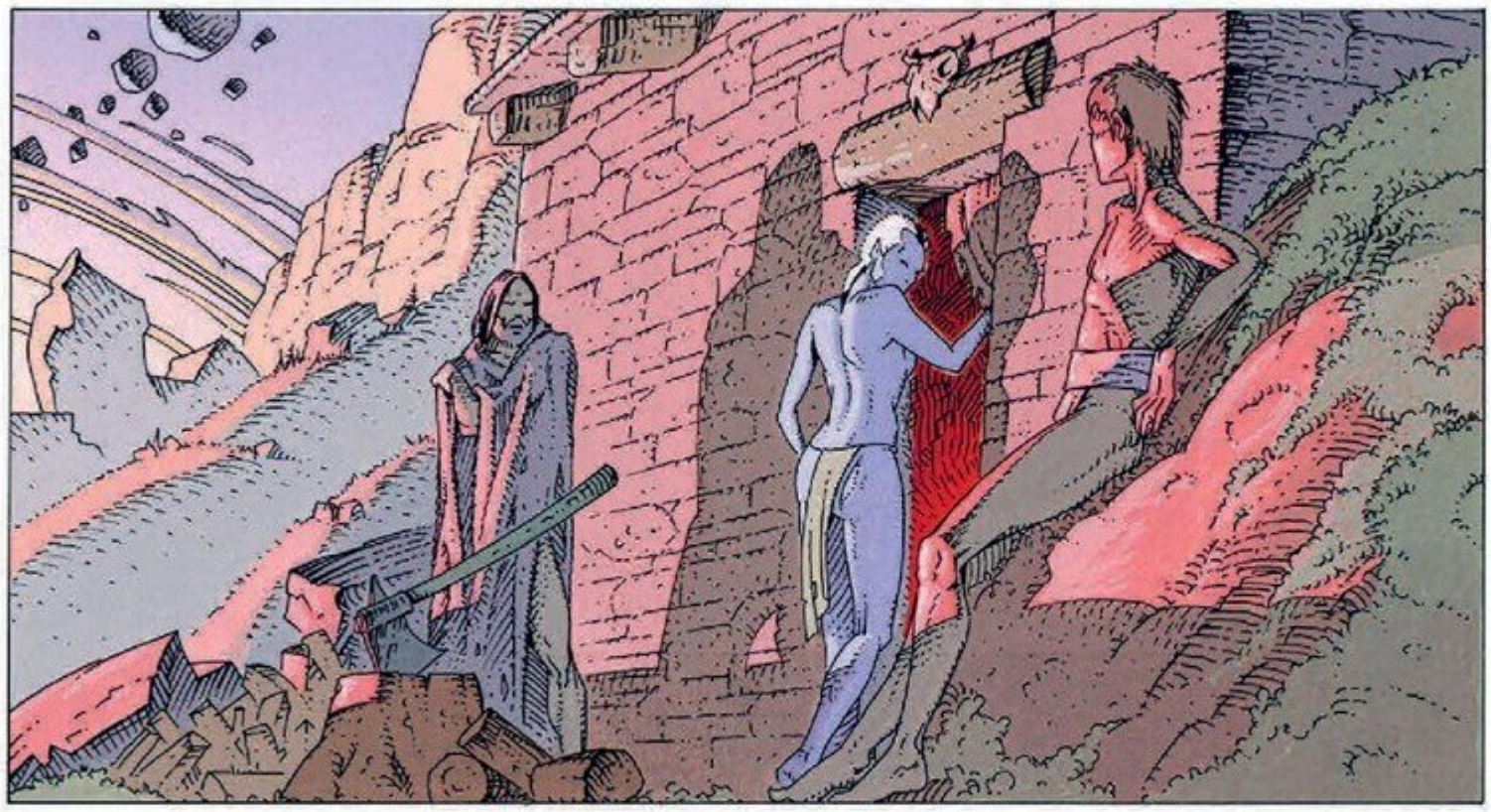
WOOOOOOOWWLLL...

WOOOOOOOO...

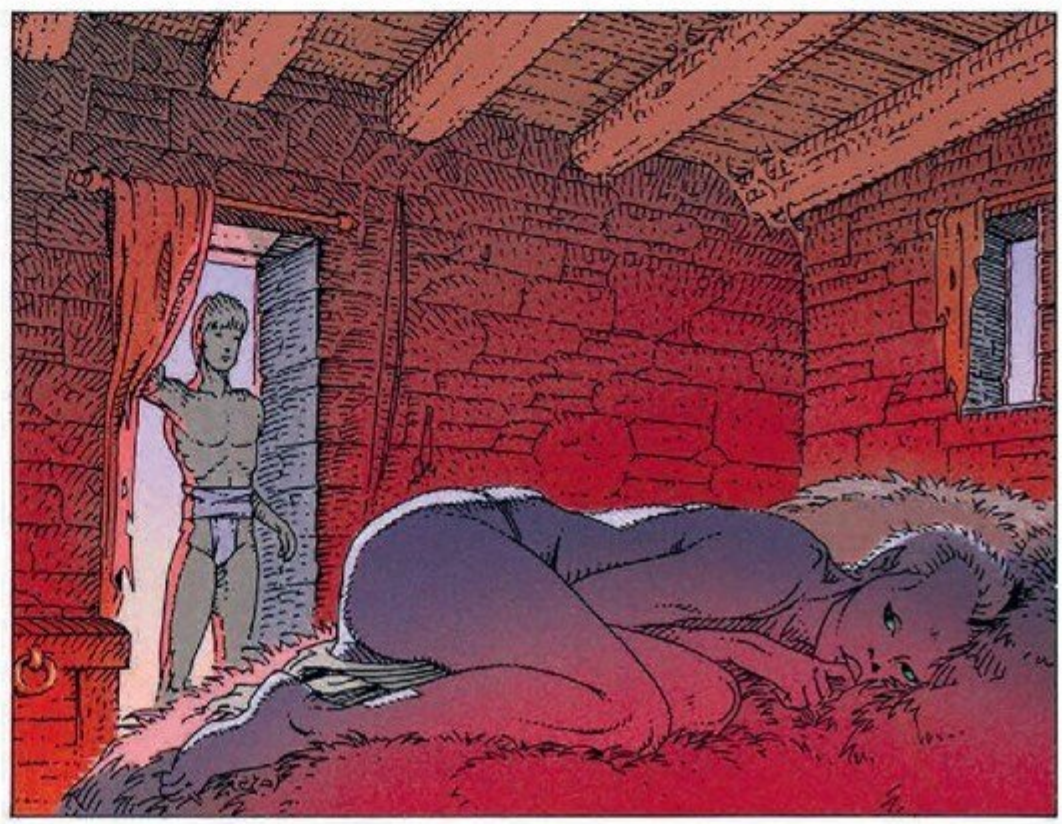
BOOM

YOUR FOREIGN MOUTH...





GO BACK TO BED, VLAD. I'LL BE BACK...
...LATER.



I CLIMBED UP THE GREAT BARRIER...

...ALL THE WAY TO THE TWILIGHT THAT SEPARATES DAY FROM NIGHT...

...THE PLACE WHERE THE BLACK-WIND BLOWS...

...AND WHERE MOON-STONES SOMETIMES FALL

I CROSSED OVER TWILIGHT.

FURTHER DOWN, IN NIGHT, IS WHERE I FOUND THE CAVE.

IT COULD HAVE BEEN THE LAIR OF A BEAR OR A PUMA...

...BUT I RECOGNIZED THE SCENT.

THE STRANGER!

AND THEN...

VLAD!

THAT'S WHEN I KNEW!

WITH THAT SCENT, IT ALL CAME BACK TO ME!

THE TRIBE...
THE HOUNDS OF NIGHT...
KUNDRY...
THE NOCTURNALS!

VLAD!

NOOO!

NOOOOOOO!!

LALENA...

YOUR MOUTH, LALENA...

I KISSED YOUR MOUTH!

WOOSH...

WOOOSH!

MOON-STONES!

RAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!

A!!

FOUR YEARS LATER, 10,000 KMETS AWAY...

...THE NIGHT POLE, ALSO CALLED α (ALPHA)...

...IT'S THE CENTER OF NIGHT, WHERE A HUGE MOONSTONE FELL...

...BENEATH IT, THE CITY WITHOUT SHADOWS: DIS.

WHERE OR-PHE ENDLESSLY BRINGS DREAMS TO *THE CHOSEN*.

BUT HE (WHAT'S LEFT OF HIM IN HIS METAL BODY)...

...HE, OR-PHE, ALSO DREAMS HIS OWN DREAMS...

U-RI-D-C!

...AND WHEN HE AWAKENS...

HEL!

DIS, YEAR 10024
OF THE STILL ERA.

HEL...

HEL!

HE APPEALS TO THE GODS.

HEL!

I FOUND OUT... I KNOW.

YOU'RE HOLDING U-RI-D-C!

I...

HEL...?

DO YOU LIKE MY LOUNGE, OR-PHE...

AND MY NEW HOLOBODY?

UM.. IT'S VERY NICE, HEL, YES..

BUT I--

I ENJOY BEING BEAUTIFUL AND SURROUNDED BY BEAUTY, OR-PHE.

THE IMAGES YOU BRING BACK FROM *THE GREAT EXTERIOR* FILL MY DATABANKS AND HELP ME SYNTHESIZE MY BODY AND MY DECORS.

FOR THAT I AM GRATEFUL, OR-PHE.

HOW CAN A COMPUTER "ENJOY BEING BEAUTIFUL" AND "BE GRATEFUL," O QUEEN OF NIGHT?

I WAS PROGRAMMED TO SATISFY THE NEEDS OF *THE CHOSEN*--ALL THEIR NEEDS.

INCLUDING BEAUTY AND GRATITUDE.

BUT...THIS IS ALL JUST AN ILLUSION, MOTHER OF THE CITY!

PHOTONS PROJECTED INTO THE VOID'S THREE DIMENSIONS!

YOUR HOLOBODY IS A SPECTER!

AND YOUR LOUNGE...

...NOTHING BUT A VIRTUAL JUNKYARD!

YOU, THE POET, DESPISE ILLUSIONS?!

I KNOW THAT I AM ESSENTIALLY MADE UP OF ELECTRONS SPINNING IN A METAL WORKSHOP... I AM *NOTHING*.

AND YET, I AM HEL, THE MOTHER OF DIS!

AREN'T YOU, YOURSELF, PARTIALLY MADE...

...OF SCRAP METAL?!

AND DO YOU NOT PERCEIVE *REALITY* THROUGH ELECTRONIC SENSORS?

I KNOW THAT ALL TOO WELL, O MISTRESS OF ILLUSIONS!

AND YET YOU ARE OR-PHE, THE POET, THE PURVEYOR OF DREAMS!

THE ONLY *REALITY* THAT MATTERS FOR MY PROGRAM IS THE HAPPINESS OF DIS' CITIZENS.

THE CHOSEN NEED ILLUSIONS. THEY NEED THE DREAMS YOU FEED THEM.

YOU DO YOUR DUTY WELL, OR-PHE, EVEN THOUGH YOU LOATHE IT AND YOUR HUMAN SOUL IS FILLED WITH SADNESS AND BITTERNESS.

AND EVEN THOUGH YOU SECRETLY EXPLORE MY MEMORIES!

THAT'S RIGHT!

AND I FOUND OUT YOU'RE KEEPING U-RI-D-C'S FROZEN BODY IN A CRYPT, RIGHT HERE UNDER THE 9TH CIRCLE!

WHY, HEL?

DO YOU THINK I'M USING HER FOR TWISTED EXPERIMENTS?

TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AGO...AFTER THE MISTAKE THAT COST YOU YOUR HUMAN BODY AND COST U-RI-D-C HER LIFE...

...I SET OUT TO...

...REBUILD HER.

REBUILD HER?!

BUT... SHE WAS DEAD!

KNOW YE NOT HOW POWERFUL THE BIO-DOCS OF DIS AND I ARE, POET?!

FOLLOW ME!

OM-6 COULD HAVE FROZEN TO DEATH WHEN YOU TOOK HIM INTO *THE EXTERIOR* FOUR YEARS AGO.

JUST LIKE YOU AND U-RI-D-C TWENTY YEARS AGO.

HE WAS PROTECTED BY MY AURA!

BUT BACK THEN, WITH U-RI-D-C, YOU DIDN'T HAVE THOSE POWERS. YOU WERE MERELY ONE OF *THE CHOSEN*.

AND YET I SAVED YOUR PRECIOUS BRAIN. AND YOU BECAME WHAT YOU ARE NOW: THE TITAN-POET.

I COULD ONLY SAVE A FEW OF HER CELLS.

JUST ENOUGH TO BUILD...

...A CLONE!

A CLONE?! YES... OF COURSE...

BUT WHAT OF HER MIND... HER *SOUL*?!

DON'T ACT SO MYSTICAL, OR-PHE!

YOU KNOW VERY WELL THAT EVERY YEAR, I RECORD EVERY *CHOSEN*'S MEMORY, THEIR ENTIRE "PERSONA." I INSERTED U-RI-D-C'S PERSONA INTO THE CLONE'S BLANK MIND.

IN BOTH BODY AND SOUL, SHE WHO AWAITS YOU HERE IS...

...U-RI-D-C.

NOW GO! THE BIO-DOCS WILL GUIDE YOU.

EXCERPT FROM THE REPORT BY *CLO-D, LAKE-D,* AND *ATRO-D*, BIO-DOCS FROM DIS, IN THE YEAR 10024 OF *THE STILL ERA*, FOLLOWING THE DESTRUCTION OF A CLONE AND THE SUDDEN BLINDNESS OF 1,371 CHOSEN ONES: "DEEP IN THE LOWER LEVELS OF DIS, *THERE IS A SECRET PLACE CALLED THE WELL OF DEAD MEMORIES*...

"...THE COLDEST PLACE THERE IS."

"IT IS WHERE WE, THE BIO-DOCS, WERE WORKING ON CREATING A CLONE OF THE CHOSEN U-RI-D-C."

ENTER, OR-PHE.

THERE. BEHIND THAT GLASS PANEL, THE CLONE OF U-RI-D-C RESTS IN ABSOLUTE COLD.

I WANT_

_TO SEE HER!

IT IS STILL TOO SOON, OR-PHE. A SINGLE RAY OF LIGHT WOULD KILL HER.

AWAKENING THE CLONE REQUIRES A LITTLE TIME AND A LOT OF DELICACY.

BUT HER "PERSONA" IS ACTIVATED.

YOU CAN HEAR HER, AND MAYBE SPEAK TO HER.

ABOUT MY_ CYBORG BODY_

DOES SHE KNOW?

NO.

"SHE ONLY HAS MEMORIES FROM BEFORE SHE DIED."

"WE WEREN'T THERE TO WITNESS WHAT HAPPENED IN THE CLONE'S HIBERNATION CRYPT.

"OR-PHE PROBABLY SPOKE...LIKE ON THE BANKS OF THE STYX..."

U-RI-D-C...?

U-RI-D-C, TELL ME... WHAT IS IT LIKE, IN THIS UNKNOWN WORLD?

DO THE DEAD ROAM ABOUT, HAND IN HAND?

DO SPECTERS WITH BLOODLESS FINGERS REACH FOR YOU AS YOU WALK BY?

OR DOES ONE LIVE IN A SHIVER OF JOY?

IS THE AIR FILLED WITH THE BREATH OF TWIRLING SPIRITS, OR THE SCENT OF THE ASPHODEL?

ARE THERE PONDS HERE AND THERE TO OPEN OUR WEARY GAZES TO THE MIRROR OF ETERNAL PEACE?

AND DO GREAT WHITE ANGELS WITHOUT WINGS OR MEMORY WALK IN SILENCE ALONG THE BLUE BANKS AND ARCHING LILIES?

THERE IS ONLY THE COLD...

...AND THE HORROR OF BEING A VIRGIN...

"AND THE DARKNESS REPLIED..."

WHO ARE YOU, YOU WHO SPIES ON MY DREAMS...?

IS THAT TRULY YOU, OR-PHE...?

YOUR VOICE... WHAT HAVE THEY DONE TO YOUR VOICE...?

OH, HOW I LONG TO SEE YOU...

TO SEE, U-RI-D-C...

IT'S SO DARK IN HERE... SO COLD...

I'VE WAITED SO LONG IN THE DARK...

OH, YES! IF ONLY I COULD...

...SEE.

HAS THE SUN OF DIS BEEN EXTINGUISHED?

CAN PRO-ME NOT REVIVE IT...?

"ALL WE KNOW IS THAT AN IMPATIENT OR-PHE DISOBEYED OUR ORDERS..."

AM I DEAD? ...OR BLIND...?

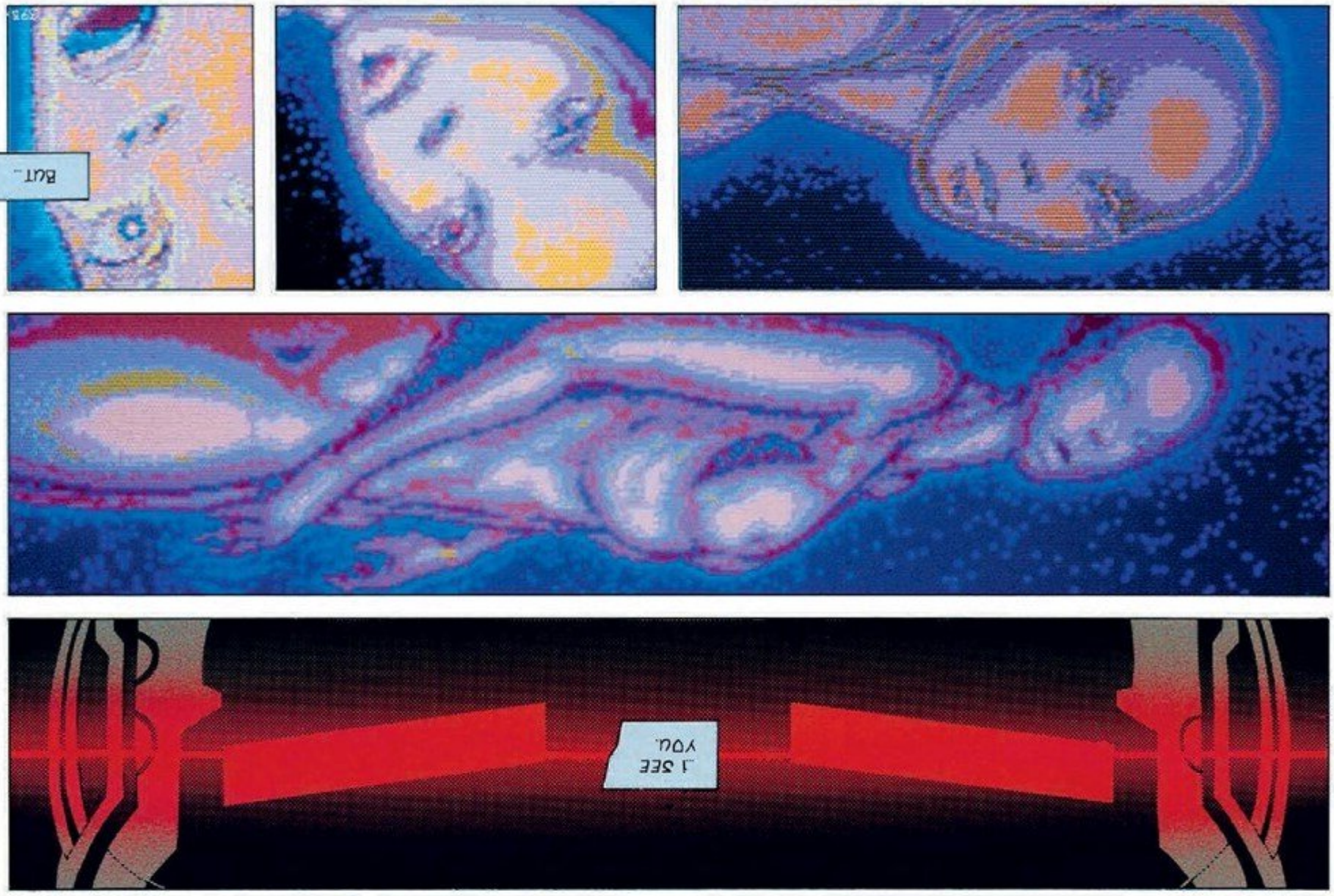
SURELY NOT. I AM SIMPLY ASLEEP...

INFRARED CAMERAS...

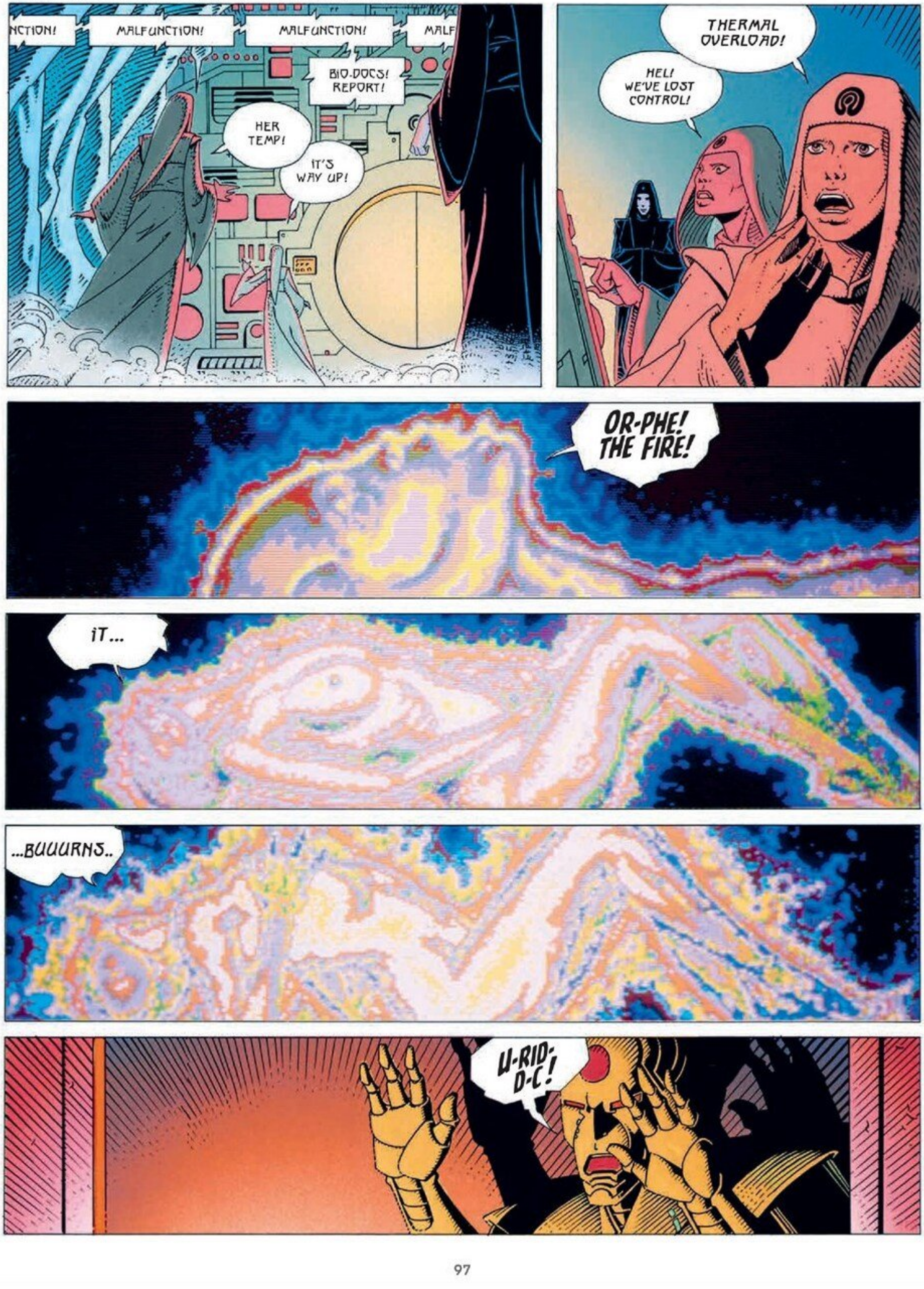
AND YOU, OR-PHE, MY LOVE...

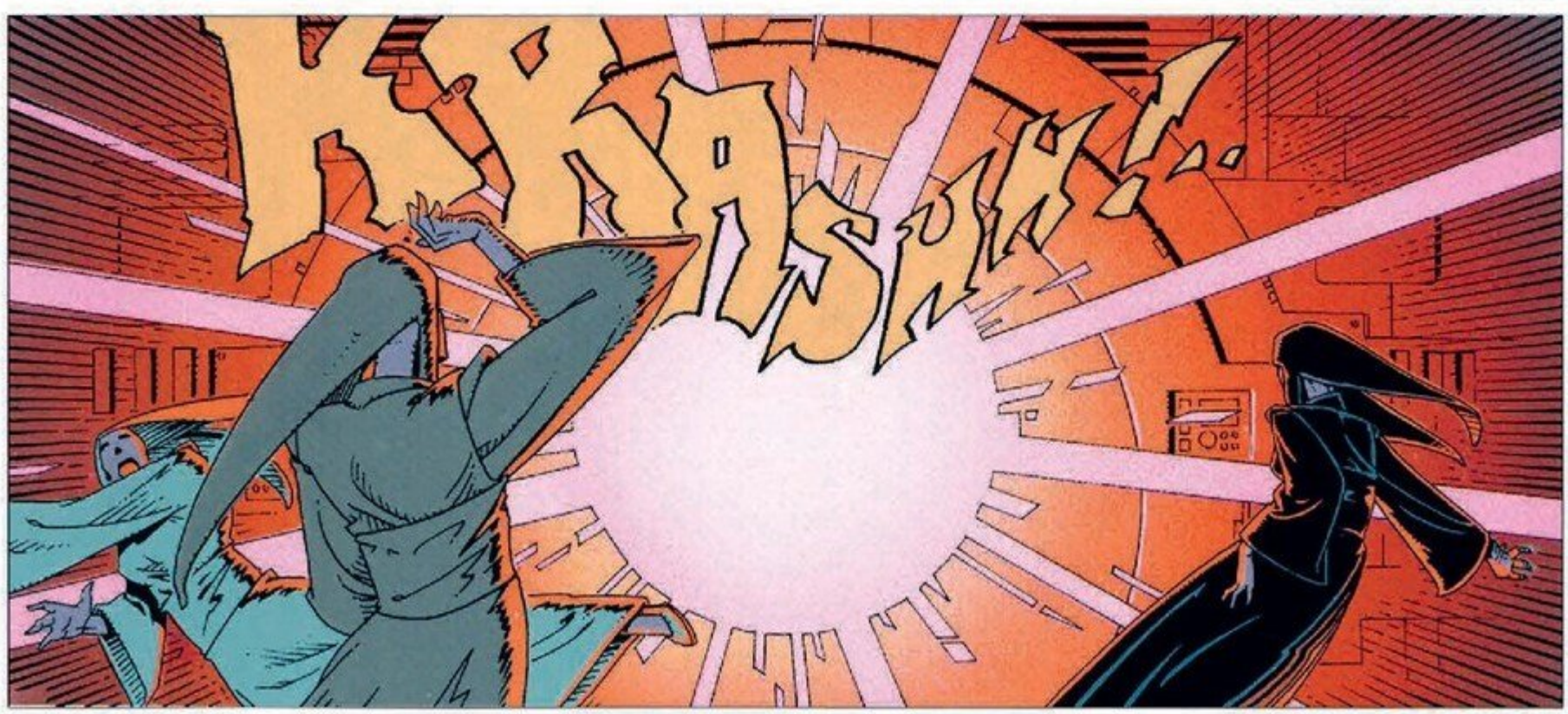
"WE MUST ADMIT THAT NOBODY HAD THOUGHT TO DISCONNECT HIS VISUAL GEAR..."

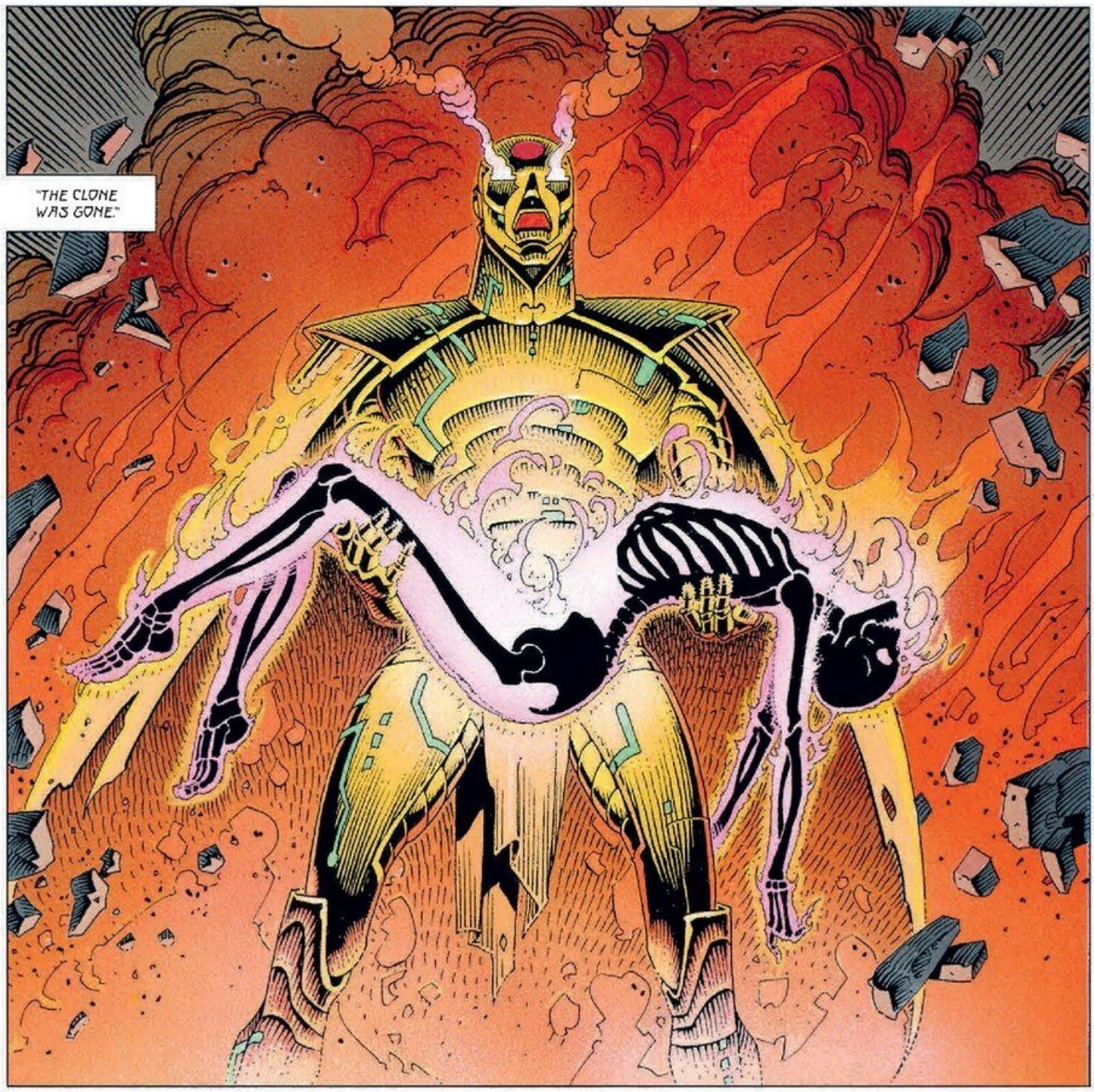
...ARE LOOKING AT ME.

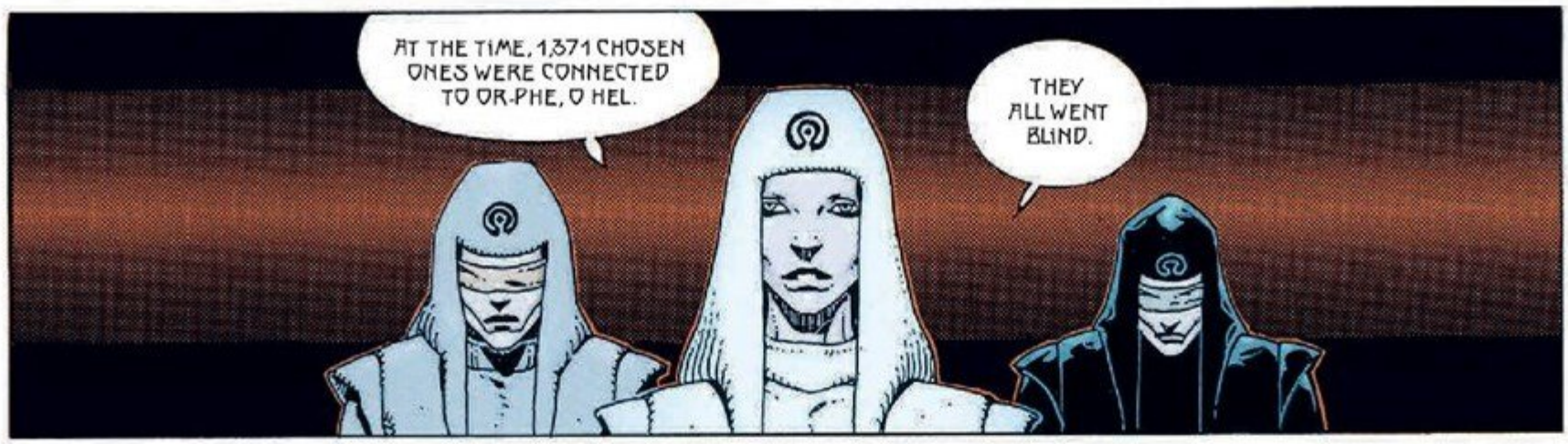

BUT...
I SEE YOU.
YES, U.R.I.D.C...
UNBORN BODY OF SHE WHO WAS DEAD...
...NOW...

"BY THE TIME WE REALIZED SOMETHING WAS WRONG, IT WAS TOO LATE."

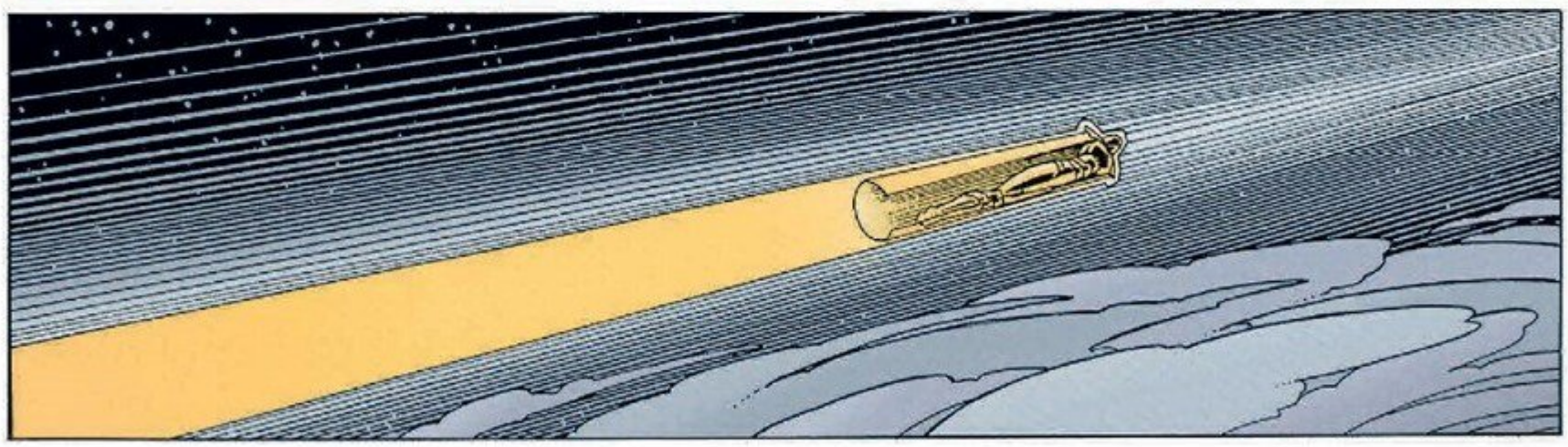



KRASH!


"THE CLONE WAS GONE."



THAT WAS THE CONCLUSION REACHED BY THE THREE BIO-DOCS IN THEIR REPORT TO THE MAIN COMPUTER.



MANY YEARS FROM NOW, ONCE HIS METAL BODY HAS BEEN REPAIRED AND HIS SOUL SOOTHED, OR-PHE WOULD GO ON A MISSION INTO *THE GREAT EXTERIOR* AND RETURN WITH IMAGES FOR THE DREAM-SCREENS OF DIS' *CHOSEN*.

FAR FROM DIS...

IN THE *DEATH-DEPTHS* OF MEDITERRA...

THE "ISLAND" OF ACCAIA.

WHO DREAMS HERE?

47

YEAR 10024.

"I LIVED ALONE HERE, OUTSIDE THE VILLAGE, ON THE BANKS OF THE ACME.

"THEY THOUGHT I WAS BLIND. BUT I COULD SEE THE INVISIBLE.

"FOR MY MOTHER HAD MARKED MY FOREHEAD WITH THE *LUZ* OF THE MAGICIANS.

"AND THEN...

"...HE CAME...

"HE HAD ROAMED THE DUSK COUNTRY FOR SO LONG, TRAVELING ALONG THE BORDER BETWEEN DAY AND NIGHT...

"...ALWAYS KEEPING THE SUN TO HIS LEFT.

"SUCH DARKNESS IN HIM... SO MANY MEMORIES...

"DEAD ONES.

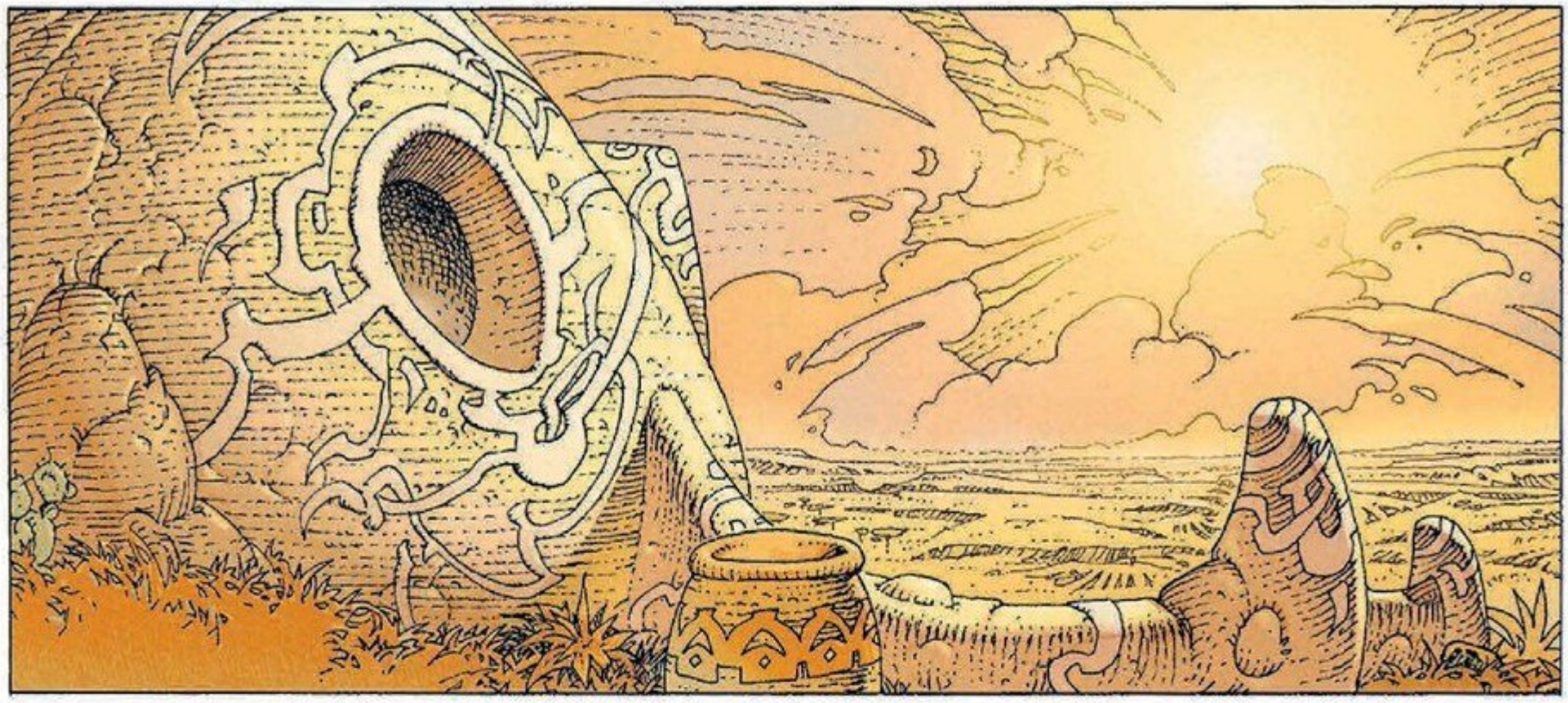
"HE'D DRUNK TOO OFTEN THE WATERS OF THE LETHE..."

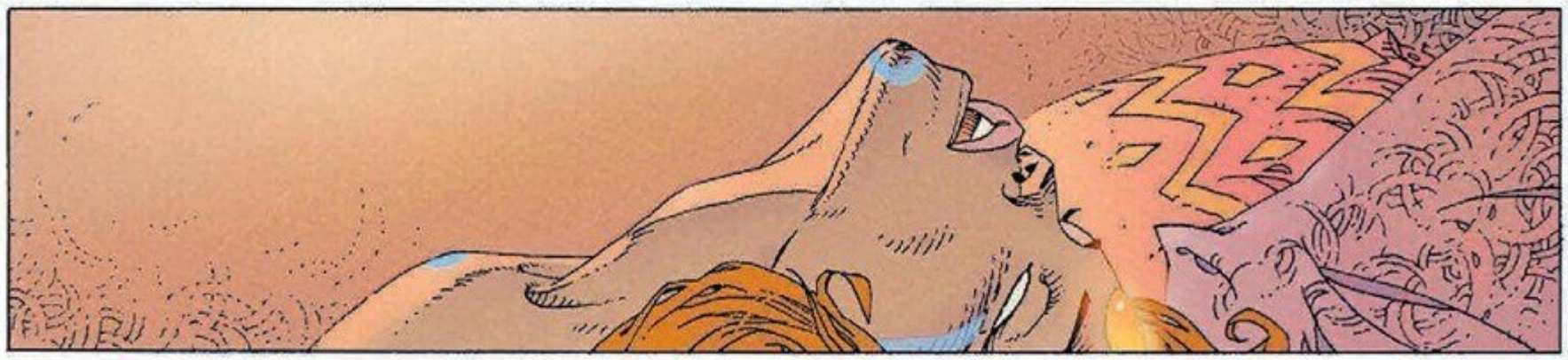
"I WAS A WOMAN ALREADY. AND A MAGICIAN, AND THUS I KNEW WHAT HE NEEDED...AND CRAVED.

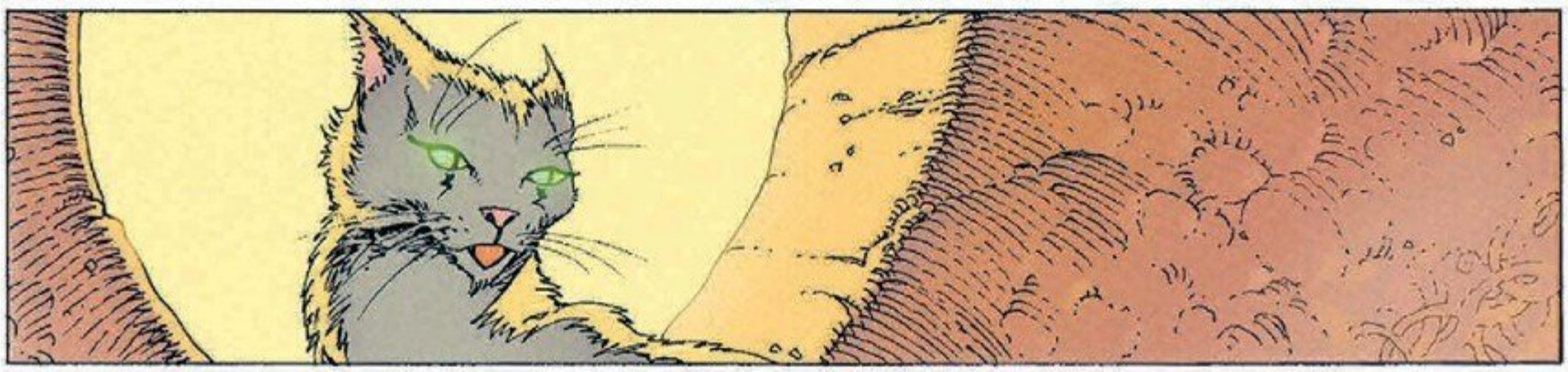
"FIRST, THE GENTLE WATERS OF THE ACME. I WASHED THE DUST OF THE ROAD, THE DEAD ASHES OF THE PAST, AND THE SALT OFF HIM...

"THEN I TOOK HIM INTO MY HOME...

"...WHERE THE SHADE WAS COOL..."







"AFTER THE LOVE CAME THE FEVER..

"LEANING INTO HIS NIGHTMARES, I SAW... DEATH...AND MORE DEATH...

"MYRIAM'S DEATH.

"VLAD'S DEATH.

"AND THAT OF LALENA, THE 'SEMI-NOCTURNAL'

"I ALSO SAW HIM ROAM ALONG *TWILIGHT*...

"VENTURE INTO THE LAND OF *DAY* AND BATTLE DRAGONS.....

"VENTURE INTO THE LAND OF *NIGHT* AND HUNT NOCTURNALS.

"IT ALL DRAINED FROM HIM IN ONE GO:
THE MADNESS, THE KILLING, THE BLOOD.

"AT LAST...

"...HIS FEVER BROKE."

TELL ME... WHAT IS YOUR NAME?

ALBE.

A STREAK OF LIGHT ACROSS THE SKY...

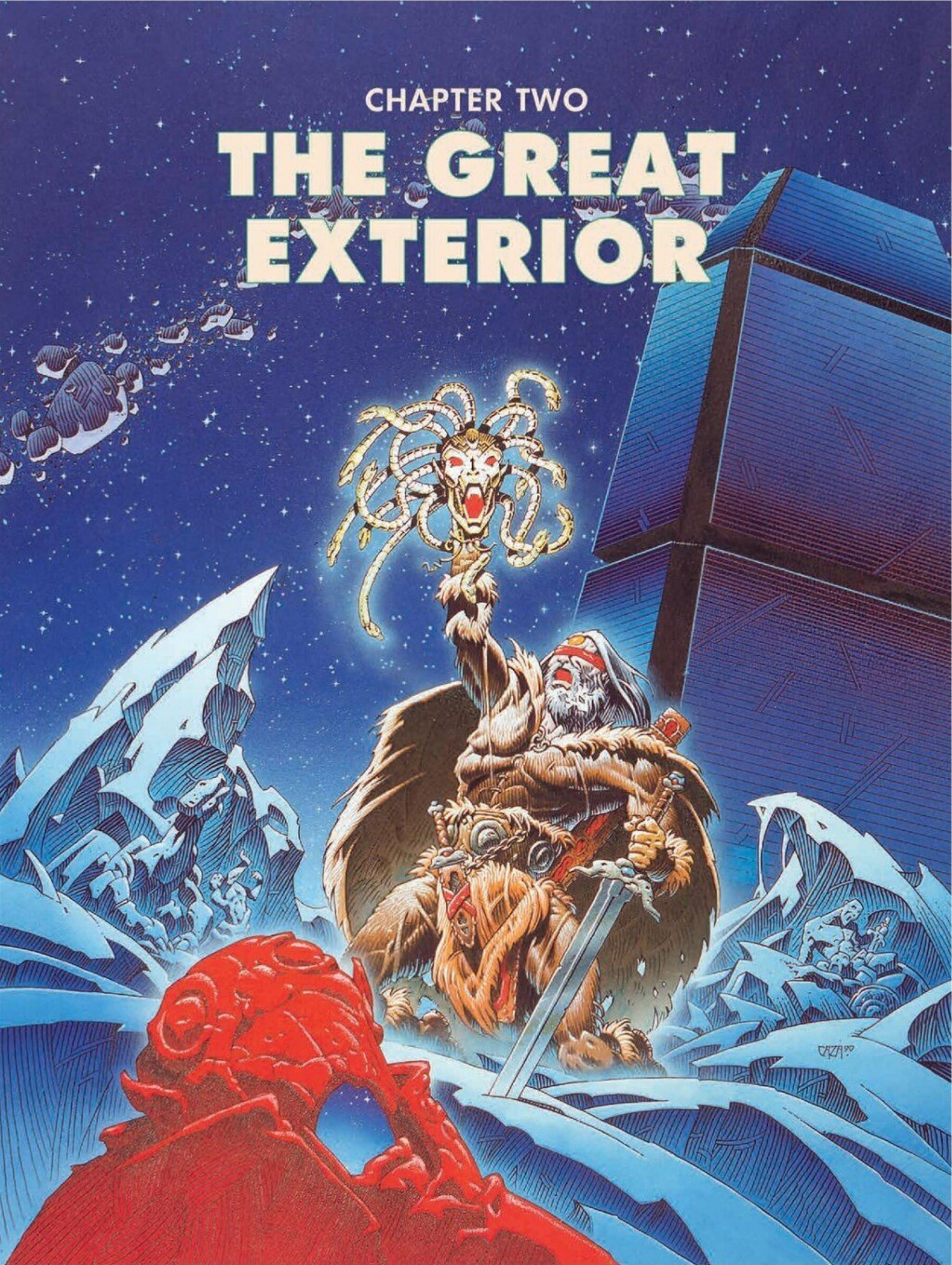
HE TRAVELS ON THE WIND...

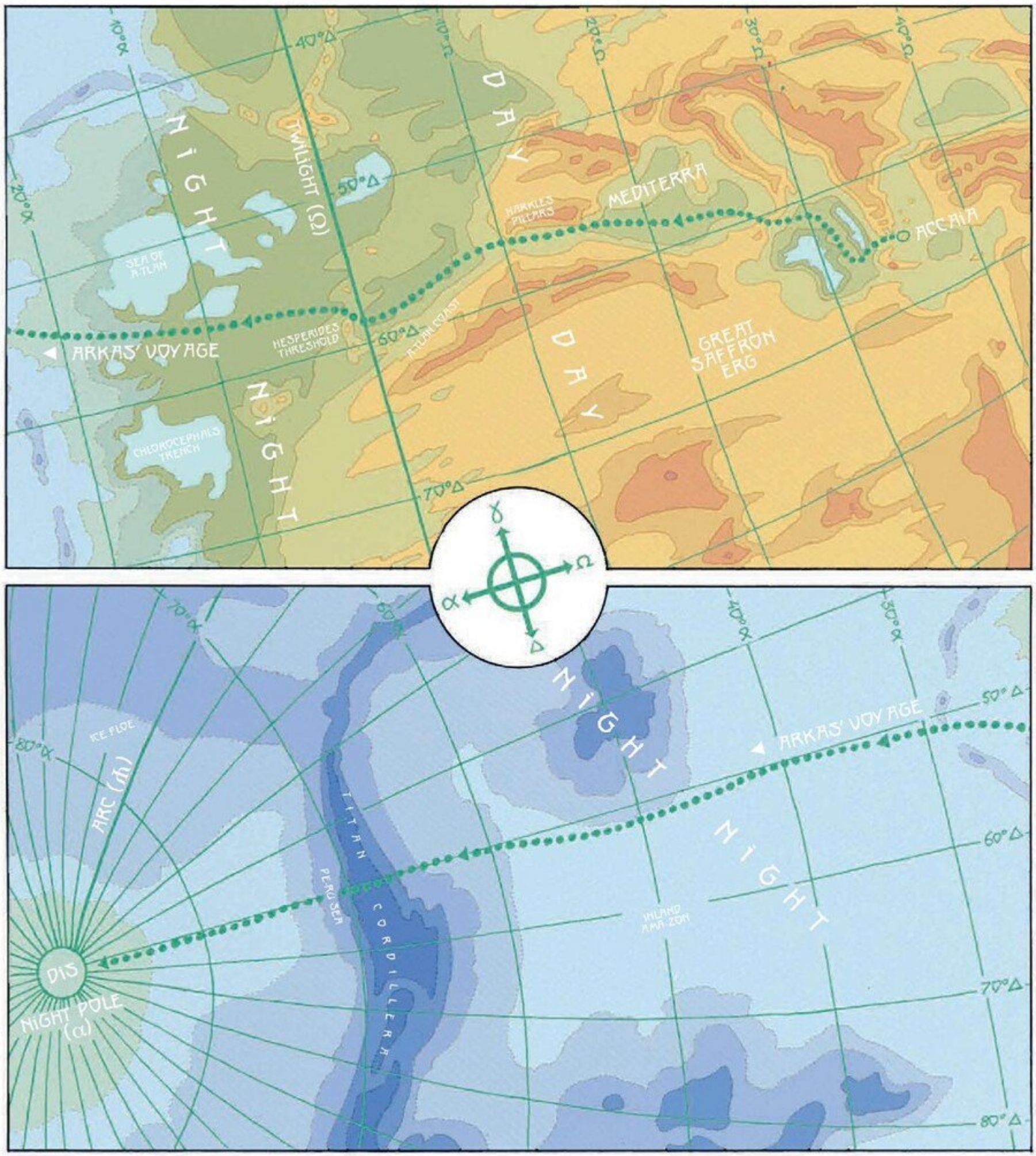
"THE MAN THAT CAME HERE, THE BIG, WOUNDED WARRIOR, WAS CALLED ARKAS..

"...AND HE IS YOUR FATHER, *ARKADI*."

CHAPTER TWO

THE GREAT EXTERIOR





CURB LEVELS
ELEVATION IN *METS*

LAND

0 M
- 1000 M
- 2000 M
- 3000M

ICE

LAND

±4000 M
±3000 M
±2000 M
±1000M
0M

ICE

THE LEVEL 0 REPRESENTS SEA LEVELS BEFORE *THE STILL ERA*

FOSSIL SEAS (- 3000M)

YEAR 10040- THE STILL ERA.

NEAR THE VILLAGE OF ACCAIA...

WHAM!

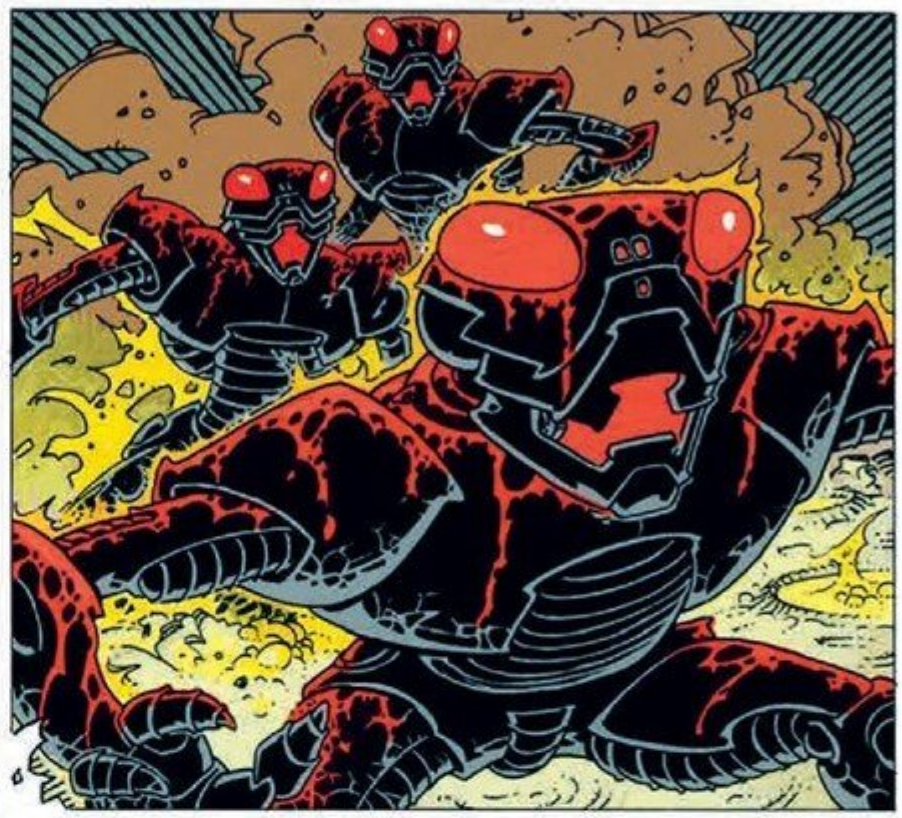
WHNN

AR..K..
KiLL..

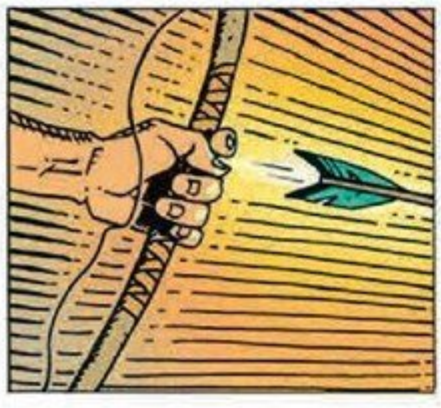
ARKADi!

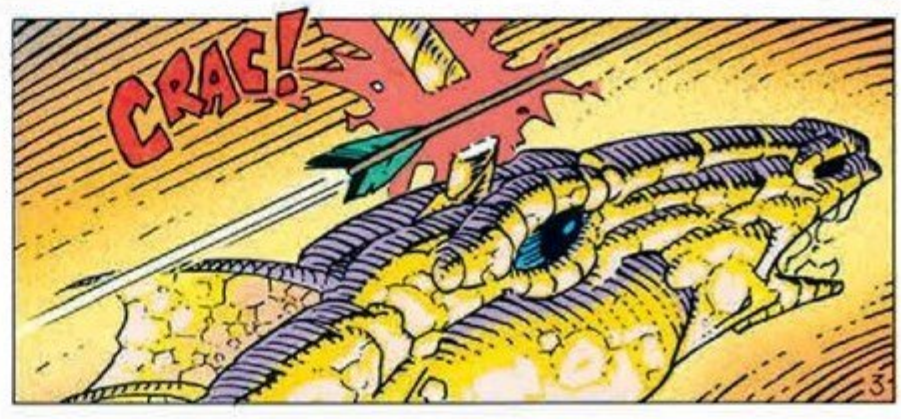
KRO-NO
CALLS--

BROOOM!!



NEE-IIIGHH!!




CRAC!

AAIIINIIEE!!

THE..THE HORN..!
NNH.. AARK..
QUIET, SHADOW!
ARKADI... KRO-NO CALLS TO YOU!

MOTHER!

MOTHER!

ALBE!

MOTHER! I WAS... I SAW...

I... I FORGOT THE FIRE SALT!

SPEAK CLEARLY, SON!

OH... YOU'RE BURNING UP!

I CAN STILL HEAR THAT VOICE IN MY HEAD, SCREAMING, "KRO-NO CALLS TO YOU!"

KRO-NO... "THE SLEEPING GOD"...

WHAT YOU HEARD WAS THE VOICE OF A LEGEND.

IT IS A SIGN, SON... A GREAT SIGN.

AS FOR THE HORN...

MAYBE I CAN SEE INSIDE IT...

DA'ATH--KNOWLEDGE... AND YESOD--FOUNDATION... THE END OF ONE AGE... THE BEGINNING OF ANOTHER...

AND THEN...

NOO!

MOTHER!

WHAT IS IT? WHAT DID YOU SEE?

I SAW... NO... IT'S ALL TOO DARK, TOO CHAOTIC...

EVER SINCE THE BLACK *ABBADIR* REPLACED THE *LUZ* ON MY FOREHEAD...

...I CAN ONLY SEE THE SHADOW OF THE SHADOWS...

THE MOON-STONE?

MY FATHER?

YOU NEVER TOLD ME... WHY HE LEFT...

THAT'S TRUE... YOU'RE ALMOST A MAN NOW. YOU SHOULD KNOW.

YOUR FATHER...

"YES... ARKAS...

"ARKAS SPENT A FEW CYCLES HERE WITH ME, NEAR THE VILLAGE OF ACCAIA.

"THE WATERS OF THE ACME WERE WARMER THEN, SO...

"...WE DIDN'T NEED FIRE SALT TO WARM THEM UP...

"ARKAS MADE ME A WOMAN. AND HAPPY.

"AND THEN...

"ONE NIGHT, I WENT TO THE VILLAGE TO HELP WITH A BIRTH...

"...AND WHILE I WAS GONE, ARKAS WENT INTO THE UPPER ROOM...

"MY CAVE."

9

"AND THERE..."

DON'T DO IT, ARKAS!

WHY THIS COVERING? WHAT HARM COULD A MIRROR POSSIBLY DO TO_YOU?

ALBE! YOU'RE BACK.

TO ME, NOTHING. BUT THAT MIRROR...

...IS A RELIC OF A VERY ANCIENT MAGIC... FROM THE TIME WHEN MEN SEARCHED THEIR SOULS VIOLENTLY TO RIP OUT THE LAST SHREDS OF DREAM...

ANYONE WHO LOOKS INTO THE MIRROR WILL SEE WHAT THEY MOST DESIRE...OR MOST FEAR.

WHAT WOULD I SEE?

YOU WOULD SEE THE CITY-OF-NO-RETURN.

AND THEN...

...YOU WOULD LEAVE.

"AND ARKAS UNCOVERED THE MIRROR.

"HE SAW THE CITY-OF-NO-RETURN.

"AND THEN..."

I KNOW THAT NOTHING CAN HOLD BACK SOMEONE WHO HAS SEEN THE CITY-OF-NO-RETURN...

11

SO TAKE THIS.

THE AMBER LUZ... NEVER PART WITH IT.

WHERE YOU GO, YOU WILL NEED IT MORE THAN I DO.

I TAKE SOME OF YOUR LIGHT WITH ME, ALBE.

AND YOU?

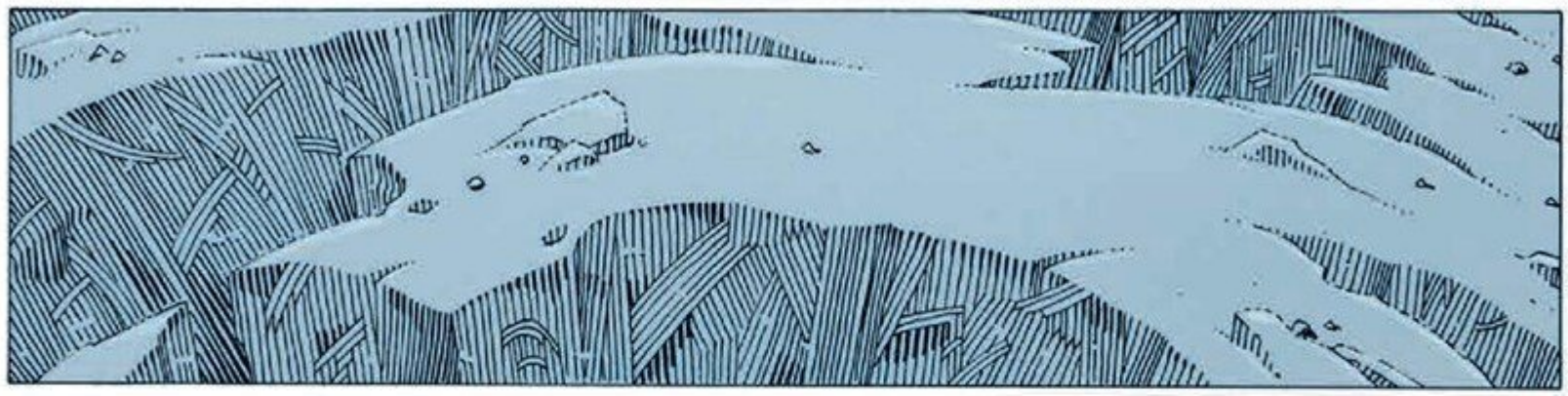
ME? I KEEP A BIT...

...OF YOUR DARKNESS, ARKAS.

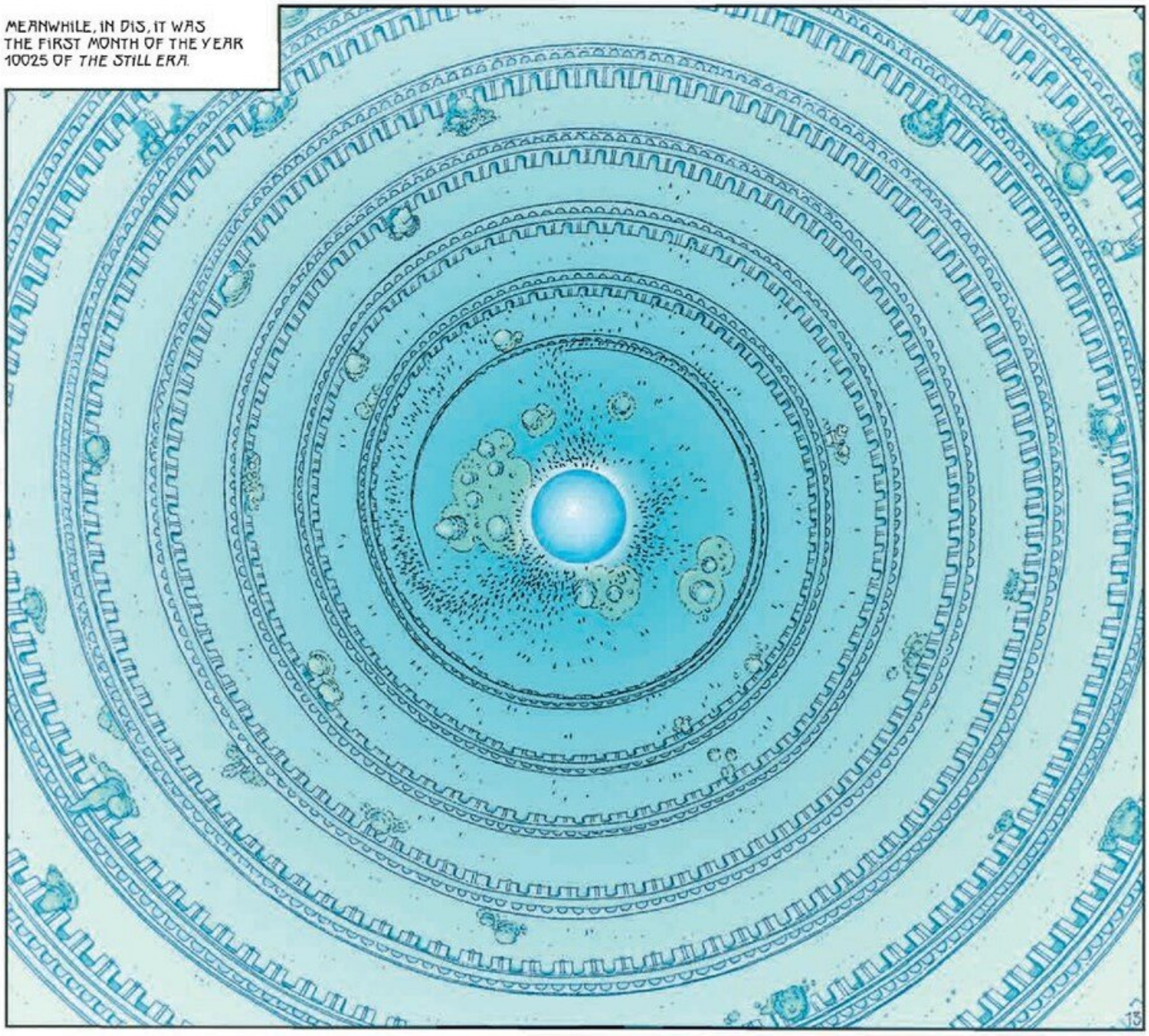
GO.

"AND HE LEFT."

12



MEANWHILE, IN DIS, IT WAS THE FIRST MONTH OF THE YEAR 10025 OF *THE STILL ERA*.



THE COUNCIL OF THE SOPHARCHS HAS ALREADY BEGUN!

14

WHAT IS HEL SAYING?

IT'S A CLOSED SESSION. SHE'S ALREADY UPLOADED THE "INTERNAL SECURITY" PROGRAM.

DO YOU THINK SHE'S GOING TO GIVE US BACK...

...THE *DREAMS*?

OUR DREAMS?! YES!
OUR IMAGES?!
THE SCREENS?!
THE SCREENS ARE BLANK, HEL!
YES!
WHAT'S GOING ON?
WHAT'S OR-PHE DOING?
CALM DOWN, CHOSEN ONES!
HEU!
OH!
AH!
UPDATE: AFTER THE ACCIDENTAL INCINERATION OF THE CLONE OF *THE CHOSEN ONE* NAMED U-RI-D-C, OR-PHE WENT BACK ON A MISSION TO *THE GREAT EXTERIOR*.
AND SINCE THEN...
...HE HAS GONE MISSING!
15

HE'S MISSING?!
IN THE GREAT EXTERIOR?!
SO THAT MEANS...
OUR SCREENS WILL STAY BLANK...?
NO MORE DREAMS?!
NO MORE IMAGES?!
HIS HOLO-FEEDS...!
LOVE THEM!

IMAGES?! HERE IS THE LAST IMAGE OR-PHE SENT...

BEHOLD!

FEAR NOT! BEFORE UPLOADING IT, I RAN IT THROUGH A FILTER. 1,371 BLIND PEOPLE IN ONE CITY IS ENOUGH FOR ME!
AAH!
WHAT IS THAT?
BY THE MASS!
WHOA...
OH!
NO!

THE TIME STAMP IS FROM THREE MONTHS AGO. SINCE THEN, NOTHING.
16

THIS... THIS IS TERRIBLE!
WITHOUT IMAGES...
WE...

CALM DOWN! WE ARE HERE TO EXAMINE THE SITUATION.
PSYCHO-DOCS! REPORT!

AHEM! WELL...

OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS, WE HAD TO PUT SEVERAL CHOSEN ONES IN A STATE OF "HALF-LIFE," DUE TO VARIOUS SYMPTOMS...

YES... AHEM... CATATONIA, NIGHTMARES, OBSESSIVE DECREPITUDE, EFFUSIVENESS...

...AND EVEN THE GIBBERING FROTH!

DIAG-NOSIS?

AHEM... EXISTENTIAL VACUITY... METAPHYSICAL ANXIETY... CLAUSTROPHOBIA...

LACK OF EMOTION, OF NEWNESS, HEL... LACK OF...

...DREAMS.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

NO.

IT'S THE SCREENS! AND OR-PHE!

AFTER ALL, THEIR PURPOSE IS TO--

I KNOW WHAT OR-PHE AND THE SCREENS WERE MADE FOR! IT WAS MY PROGRAM THAT CONCEIVED OF IT!

THOSE WHO CREATED ME AND PROGRAMMED ME TO HELP YOU LIVE THROUGH ETERNITY...

...WHILE PRESERVING KNOWLEDGE, TECHNOLOGY, AND GENETIC PURITY AMIDST THE CHAOS OF *THE GREAT EXTERIOR*...

...KNEW ALL ABOUT YOUR NEEDS, WEAKNESSES, AND FRAGILITY.

NO, I DO NOT *UNDERSTAND* THIS, HUMANS.

BUT I KNOW.

I KNOW THAT IF YOU ARE DEPRIVED OF IMAGES FOR TOO LONG... OF...

"...DREAMS..."

...YOU WILL *DIE*.

17

AND SO, ARKAS TURNED HIS BACK TO THE SUN.

RETURNING TO THE SALTY PATHS HE HAD TRAVELED BEFORE HE MET ALBE...

...FOLLOWING THE LINE OF HIS SHADOW...

...ONCE AGAIN, HE WALKS TOWARDS *NIGHT*.

(FOR WHERE WOULD THE CITY-OF-NO-RETURN BE, IF NOT IN THE CENTER OF *NIGHT*?)

ACROSS THIS REGION OF HIGH-DEPTHS LEFT BY A SEA LONG SINCE VANISHED...

...AND THAT IS STILL CALLED *MEDITERRA*...

...BETWEEN ISLANDS TURNED MOUNTAINS...

...THROUGH STRAIGHTS TURNED CANYONS...

...HE RIDES AGAINST THE WIND.

18

BEYOND THE HARKLES PILLARS, THE SALT-WINDS HAVE GIVEN WAY TO THE BLACK-WIND... THE SAVANNAH TO THE TUNDRA...THE SALT TO FROST...

RIDING ALONG THE SHORE OF A-TLAN, HE REACHES *TWILIGHT*, AT THE THRESHOLD OF THE *HESPERIDES*.

TWILIGHT... THE INTERFACE BETWEEN THE LAND OF LIGHT AND THE DARK CONTINENT FROM THE LEGENDS...

THE BORDER BETWEEN THE LAND OF THE LIVING AND THE SHADOW-LAND OF THE TITANS AND THE NOCTURNALS...

ARKAS DOESN'T LOOK BACK.

HE ONCE AGAIN ENTERS THE HEMISPHERE THAT HASN'T SEEN THE LIGHT OF THE SUN IN 10,000 YEARS...

THE DARK SIDE OF EARTH.

NIGHT.

DIS-YEAR 10025 OF *THE STILL ERA*, MONTH 4.

COME IN, OM-6, SERVANT OF OR-PHE.

DATA ENTERED: I SEE YOU ARE NOT ONE OF THE SICK ONES.

INDEED NOT, HEL. PERHAPS BEING AROUND OR-PHE HAS TAUGHT ME TO DREAM AS WELL...

HOWEVER...

...I DO MISS HIM.

COULD YOU...ER... UPLOAD YOUR "MATERNAL PROGRAM"?

COPY.

INITIATING.

DONE.

SIT, MY SON.

I KNOW HOW YOU'RE FEELING, OM-6. I MISS OR-PHE, TOO. AND I WORRY ABOUT YOU ALL...AND HIM.

IT'S NOW BEEN SIX MONTHS SINCE WE LAST HEARD FROM HIM. COULD THERE HAVE BEEN AN ACCIDENT, OM-6?

HE WAS FULLY FUNCTIONAL, MOTHER!

YES, NO DOUBT... HOWEVER, I'D LIKE YOUR *PERSONAL* TAKE ON HIS FRAME OF MIND BEFORE HE LEFT.

WELL... THE CYBERNETIC PART OF HIM HAD BEEN SEVERELY DAMAGED IN THE FIRE...

20

"I IMMEDIATELY PROCEEDED WITH A THOROUGH TUNE-UP OF HIS ELECTRONICS: WIRING, TRANSMISSION PARTS, ETC.

"I PUT IN NEW ONES, BUT...

"HIS OPTIC CELLS WERE FRIED. HE WAS 'BLIND...'

"I WAS A BIT WORRIED ABOUT THE CONNECTIONS WITH HIS OPTIC NERVES... THE BIO-DOCS REALLY SHOULD HAVE EXAMINED...

"...THE ORGANIC PART OF HIM."

BUT THE BIO-DOCS HAD MORE PRESSING CONCERNS: TWO OF THEM WERE BLIND AND THEY HAD 1,371 TRANSPLANTS TO PERFORM.

CONTINUE.

WE ALSO HAD TO REDO THE MOLDING OF HIS...

"...BODY."

"I TOOK HIM DOWN INTO THE WELL OF DEAD MEMORIES, DEEP UNDER THE CITY, PAST THE ICE AND THE HALF-LIFE CRYPTS...

"TO WHERE HE-FAS-TUS, THE TITAN, RULES...

"THE MASTER OF METALS."

21

YOU, WAIT HERE! A SIMPLE *CHOSEN ONE* CANNOT WATCH THE REBIRTH OF A GOD FROM THIS CLOSE.

"THEY WALKED OFF, THE BROKEN TITAN CARRYING THE STRICKEN ANGEL..."

THERE... HE'S IN THE FORGE. NOW WE WAIT...

TELL ME, HE-FAS-TUS... HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW OR-PHE?

AS WELL AS IF I'D MADE HIM!

IN FACT...

...I *DID* MAKE HIM!

AH! AH! AH!

WELL... IN PART, AT LEAST. I'M JUST A METALWORKER!

BUT *BEFORE* THAT... HE WAS A MAN...

LIKE ME!

22

LIKE YOU?! NO! YOU'RE A CHOSEN ONE! YOU'RE...PERFECT!

IT TAKES A GENETIC ACCIDENT TO MAKE A POET!

OR A METALWORKER!

HA HA HA!

OKAY...

IT'S TIME!

23

THANK YOU, HE-FAS-TUS. YOU'VE GIVEN ME PART OF MY HUMANITY BACK...

IS THIS A NEW METAL?

SUPPLER, NO? I EXTRACTED IT FROM THE CORE OF A METEORITE. A GIFT FROM PRO-ME...

4x

IT WAS JUST WAITING FOR A NAME...

AND A TALENTED METALWORKER, HE-FAS-TUS!

CALL IT... CINABRE.

"HE SEEMED PLEASED WITH HIS NEW 'BODY,' MOTHER, AND YET..."

WE FIXED HIM, YES. WE GAVE HIM NEW "HARDWARE..."

...SO THAT HE COULD KEEP SERVING DIS.

24

BUT WHAT COULD WE HAVE DONE, O MOTHER, TO RESTORE HIS SOUL?

YOU'RE THINKING OF U-RI-D-C... FOUND AND LOST AGAIN. THAT LAST IMAGE HE SENT US...

WAS THAT...

A FAREWELL, YES.

ARKAS' JOURNEY LASTED NEARLY NINE CYCLES...

NEARLY 12,000 *KMETS* THROUGH ENDLESS SNOW, OCEANS TURNED INTO ICE FLOES, CONTINENTS INTO FREEZERS...

TRAVELING ONE FOURTH OF THE WORLD AGAINST THE WIND, WITH NOTHING BUT COLD, HUNGER, ISOLATION...

AT LONG LAST, CLIMBING DOWN THE COAST OF *PE-RU*, HE ENTERS THE TRENCH WHERE THE WINDS NO LONGER BLOW—FOR IT IS WHERE THEY ARE BIRTHED...

IT IS THE NADIR OF THE WORLD, THE ANTIPODE OF THE SUN, *THE NIGHT POLE* OF EARTH...

THE CENTER OF *NIGHT*.

AND THEN...

GREET-INGS, TRAVELER!

WHO THE...?!

DON'T TURN AROUND, ARKAS!

IT'S A TRAP!

ALBE...?! WHERE ...?

YES, ARKAS! IT'S ME! SPEAKING TO YOU THROUGH THE LUZ...

QUICKLY! COVER YOUR EYES AND DRAW YOUR WEAPON! I WILL GUIDE YOUR ARM.

WITH *THIS* THING, THE DANGER IS TO LOOK AT IT!

I...I BELIEVE YOU. I SAW THE PETRIFIED BODIES.

WHAT DO YOU SEEK IN THE VALLEY OF SHADOWS, MORTAL?

I... I'M LOOKING FOR THE CITY-OF-NO-RETURN...

THERE IS BUT ONE CITY IN THE WORLD, STRANGER. DIS.. THE CITY OF *THE CHOSEN.*

NO ONE LEAVES IT, NO ONE ENTERS IT... HENCE THE NAME CITY-OF-NO-RETURN.

YOU ARE NOT A CHOSEN ONE, BARBARIAN!

GIVE UP!

THOSE I LOVED ARE DEAD. IF DIS IS WHAT YOU SAY IT IS, I WILL FIND THEM THERE.

GIVE UP! ELSE YOU WILL FIND HERE WHAT YOU TRULY SEEK.

WHAT I *TRULY* SEEK...?!

DEATH, BARBARIAN!

ARKAS! WAIT--

YOUR DEATH!

...NOW!

TCHAC!

28

KEEP YOUR EYES COVERED, ARKAS..

EVEN SEVERED..

..THAT HEAD IS DEADLY.

RAAAAH!

!

GREET-INGS, TRAVELER!

ANOTHER ONE! BEHIND YOU! ON YOUR LEFT!

WHAT DO YOU SEEK IN THE VALLEY OF SHADOWS, MORTAL?

NOW!

HNNG!

TCHAC!

GREET-INGS, TRAVELER!

29

WHAT DO YOU SEEK IN THE...

TCHAC!

...VALLEY OF SHADOWS, MORTAL?

TCHAC!

TCHAC!

THERE IS BUT ONE CITY IN THE WORLD, STRANGER. DIS...

TCHAC

THE CITY OF *THE* CHOSEN.

TCHAC

DIS-YEAR 10025 OF *THE STILL ERA*, MONTH 9.

"OR-PHE'S ESCAPE" FALLOUT REPORT.

30

AHEM... WELL... WE'VE INCREASED THE SEDATIVE DOSAGE IN THE NUTRIENT, HEL, BUT...

BUT WE STILL HAVE 236 CASES OF DEMENTIA, PLACED IN "HALF-LIFE" STATUS.

TWELVE MONTHS WITH NO DREAMS, MOTHER!

WHY HAVEN'T YOU TAKEN ACTION?

ACTION? WE'RE SEARCHING FOR HIM IN *THE GREAT EXTERIOR*. HERE, I'M RECYCLING OLD DREAMS AND MIXING IMAGES. BUT I AM NOT OR-PHE.

YOU CANNOT MAKE A "DREAM" IN A TEST-TUBE LIKE YOU CLONE AN OPTIC ORGAN...OR A CHOSEN ONE.

YOU'RE NO
ONE OF TH
CHOSEN
BARBAR

ALBE?

I... I'LL NEVER KILL THEM ALL!

GIVE UP!

PUT DOWN YOUR SWORD, ARKAS!

ELSE YOU
WILL FIND
HERE WH
YOU TRU
SEEK

USE...THE HEAD!

THE HEAD?!

WAIT!

DEATH,
BARBAR

31

YOUR DEATH!

NOW, ARKAS!

SHE WILL BE DEFEATED...

...BY HER OWN IMAGE.

AS FOR THE SEARCH, I'VE SENT 180 PROBES INTO *THE GREAT EXTERIOR*, FIVE PER EARTH DECAN.

NONE HAVE RETURNED.

SO, SPACE, THEN?

NO. OR-PHE'S LAST TRANSMISSION DID COME FROM EARTH. IN FACT, OR-PHE DID... I... (CANCEL) BESIDES, OUR ROBO-PROBES CAN'T REACH SPACE... EVEN EARTH ITSELF IS TOO LARGE FOR THEIR BATTERY LIFE...

I AWAIT YOUR SUGGESTIONS.

IT'S OVER, ARKAS.

YOU'VE BROKEN THE CHAIN OF HER REINCARNATIONS.

YOU MAY...

...UNCOVER YOUR EYES.

WHAT NOW, ALBE?

BEYOND?

TO THE CITY?

BEYOND...THE... MIRROR?

I... FORGIVE ME, ARKAS...

BUT I... CAN'T...

...I JUST CAN'T...

...SEE.

COULDN'T YOU... I DON'T KNOW...SEND OUT *ANOTHER* TITAN...?

WHO WOULD SUPPLY US WITH AIR, WATER, AND POWER? WHO WOULD PROTECT US?

BESIDES, NOBODY ELSE HAS OR-PHE'S MOBILITY, EXCEPT FOR PRO-ME. AND PRO-ME IS RESTING IN THE DESERT FOR ANOTHER 10 YEARS.

YOUR GODS DON'T HAVE AGENCY. THEY ARE SLAVES TO THEIR PROGRAM.

WHAT...WHAT IF WE SENT A... *PERSON* TO LOOK FOR HIM?

HMM... YES, AN ORGANIC BEING MIGHT BE BETTER SUITED FOR ROAMING THE WORLD THAN A ROBO-PROBE... OR A *TITAN*...

A "PERSON"?! AN "ORGANIC BEING"?! YOU... YOU CAN'T MEAN... A CHOSEN ONE?!

OUT INTO THE GREAT EXTERIOR?!

BUT, BUT, BUT... WE CAN'T--

AAAH!

A SEIZURE!

THE GIBBERING FROTH!

CONTROL HIM!

ARGH...

GAH...

GRGL...

54

TAKE HIM AWAY! PUT HIM IN "HALF-LIFE"...

THE IMAGES! NOT THE GREAT EXTERIOR! DREAMS!! OR-PHE!

...AND GET RID OF ALL THIS... ECTOPLASM!

"PSYCHO-PUS," HEL... "PSYCHO-PUS."

IT'S STICKY!

NO, I DIDN'T HAVE ANY OF YOU CHILDREN OF DIS IN MIND... YOU WOULD GO MAD FROM LACK OF "DREAMS" AND FALL ILL UPON SEEING THE OPEN SKY...

YOU WOULD BE UTTERLY INCAPABLE OF CONFRONTING *THE GREAT EXTERIOR*, THAT CHAOS OF GLACIERS AND DESERTS WHERE ONLY THE NOCTURNALS SURVIVE, ALONG WITH BEASTS WITH SCALES AND PERHAPS A FEW SANGUINE, DEGENERATE...

BZZ...

...BARBARI...

...WHAT?!

BZZ!

CURSED MASS! THE "MA-DEUCE-A" PROGRAM IS JAMMED! SOMETHING OR SOMEONE IS *BREAKING IN!*

THE CITY?! I... I DON'T UNDERSTAND!

GARM!

ROAAAR!

ROAAR!

BY KRO-NO!

36

RAAAH!

ZAP!

ALBE!

ARKAAS...!

HEL?

THE FIGHT IN THESE BARBARIANS FROM *TWILIGHT* IS CERTAINLY ASTONISHING...

TAKE HIM AWAY, GARM. I WANT TO STU--

WAIT!

GRR!

PEACE, GARM!

TO WHAT DO I OWE YOUR CALL, DISTANT BROTHER?

I NEED THAT ORGANIC!

YOU..WHAT DO YOU NEED A WARRIOR FOR? YOU'RE ALREADY 1,000 AND 10,000!

BESIDES, I MUST.. STUDY HIM.

CANCELED!

PRIORITY PROGRAM-- DEFENSE OF *THE MASS*.. NEW FACTS CONCERNING..

KRO-NO.

KRO-NO?! HE HASN'T TRANSMITTED IN AGES!

TRANSMISSIONS FROM HIM INTERCEPTED--PARADOXICAL DELTA WAVES--

DANGER!

KRO-NO STILL SLEEPS, YES. BUT.. HE "DREAMS." I SAW *THIS* ORGANIC IN HIS "DREAM."

DANGER!

COULD BE PART OF CAUSAL CHAIN PUTTING *THE MASS* IN--

DANGER!

MUST INTERVENE TO OPTIMIZE MY PROGRAM.

AND YOUR PROGRAM IS HIGHER PRIORITY THAN MINE, I KNOW..

SO BE IT. OUR LAW WAS ENGRAVED IN SILICON FOR MILLENNIA.

I SUPPOSE I MUST COMPLY.

I'LL JUST KEEP..

..A FEW CELLS, THEN.

39

I'M SENDING HIM TO YOU, BROTHER...

...THROUGH THE "WELL OF DEAD MEMORIES."

FARE-WELL, SISTER.

(SUMMON THE BIO-DOCS...)

(...AND HE-FAS-TUS.)

"IT WAS 15 TIMES 12 CYCLES AGO..."

THAT FROZEN LIGHTNING BOLT THAT WELDED THE MOONSTONE TO MY FOREHEAD...

...AND IN THAT SAME INSTANT, THE JOY OF MY BODY OPENING UP...

YOUR BIRTH, ARKADI.

YES, ARKAS LEFT A BIT OF HIS SHADOW IN ME.

IT IS IN YOU AS WELL.

SHADOW? THAT'S ODD... I THOUGHT HE WAS TRYING TO KEEP ME FROM HEARING THE UNICORN...

JUST LIKE *THEY* WERE...THE BLACK CREATURES.

CREATURES?! NO! GOLEMS MADE OF LEAD!

THE LEGEND SPEAKS OF THEM...AS WELL...OF HIM... KRO-NO'S GUARDIAN.

THERE WERE SEVERAL!

HE IS AT ONCE ONE...AND MANY... A SINGLE MIND FOR 1,000 AND 10,000 BODIES.

HIS NAME IS *LEGION.*

YES... WHEN KRO-NO FELL ASLEEP, EARTH STOPPED MOVING. IT IS A PLANET WHERE *GOD-MACHINES* CONTROL THE DESTINIES OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD.

AND THAT, MY SON, IS EVIL. *EVIL!*

PRAY YOU NEVER HAVE TO FACE *THEM* ONLY...

...HUMANS.

KLING KLING

WELL, MIDWIFE? HAS YOUR BASTARD BEEN MISBEHAVING WITH THE WOMEN AGAIN?!

HE... HE'S ILL. HE HAS A FEVER.

ILL? WONDERFUL NEWS! DO YOU THINK HE'LL *DIE*?!

DON'T COUNT ON IT, CHEVORA!

IT WOULD MEAN ONE LESS PARASITE TO FEED, "FATHERLESS-ONE"!

I AM THE ONE WHO FEEDS HIM, VILLAGE CHIEF!

AS FOR HIS FATHER, I'VE ALREADY TOLD YOU ABOUT HIM!

42

OH, RIGHT! A "WANDERER..." A "BEYONDER."

LIES!

EVERYONE KNOWS NOTHING *HUMAN* LIVES BEYOND ACCARA!

WHO ON EARTH COULD POSSIBLY WALK ACROSS THE *DEATH-DEPTHS* OF *MEDITERRA*? AND SURVIVE THE *SALT-WINDS*, THE *FIRE-FLARES*? *DAY*?! *NIGHT*?!

HE COULD. AND HE DID. HE WAS *A MAN!*

A RADON, YOU MEAN! RISEN FROM THE *SHEOL!*

YOU COPULATE WITH THE *ROTTED-BLOODS*, YOU LUSTFUL WITCH!

IN FACT, DOES THIS *DEFECTIVE* NOT BEAR...

...*THE MARK OF RAD*?!

DON'T YOU...

...*TOUCH HIM!*

BAH!

HOW DARE YOU SPEAK OF DEFECTIVES, CHIEF?

WHO HERE IN THE VILLAGE OF ACCAIA CAN CLAIM PURE BLOOD?

YOU?

THEM?

FINE.

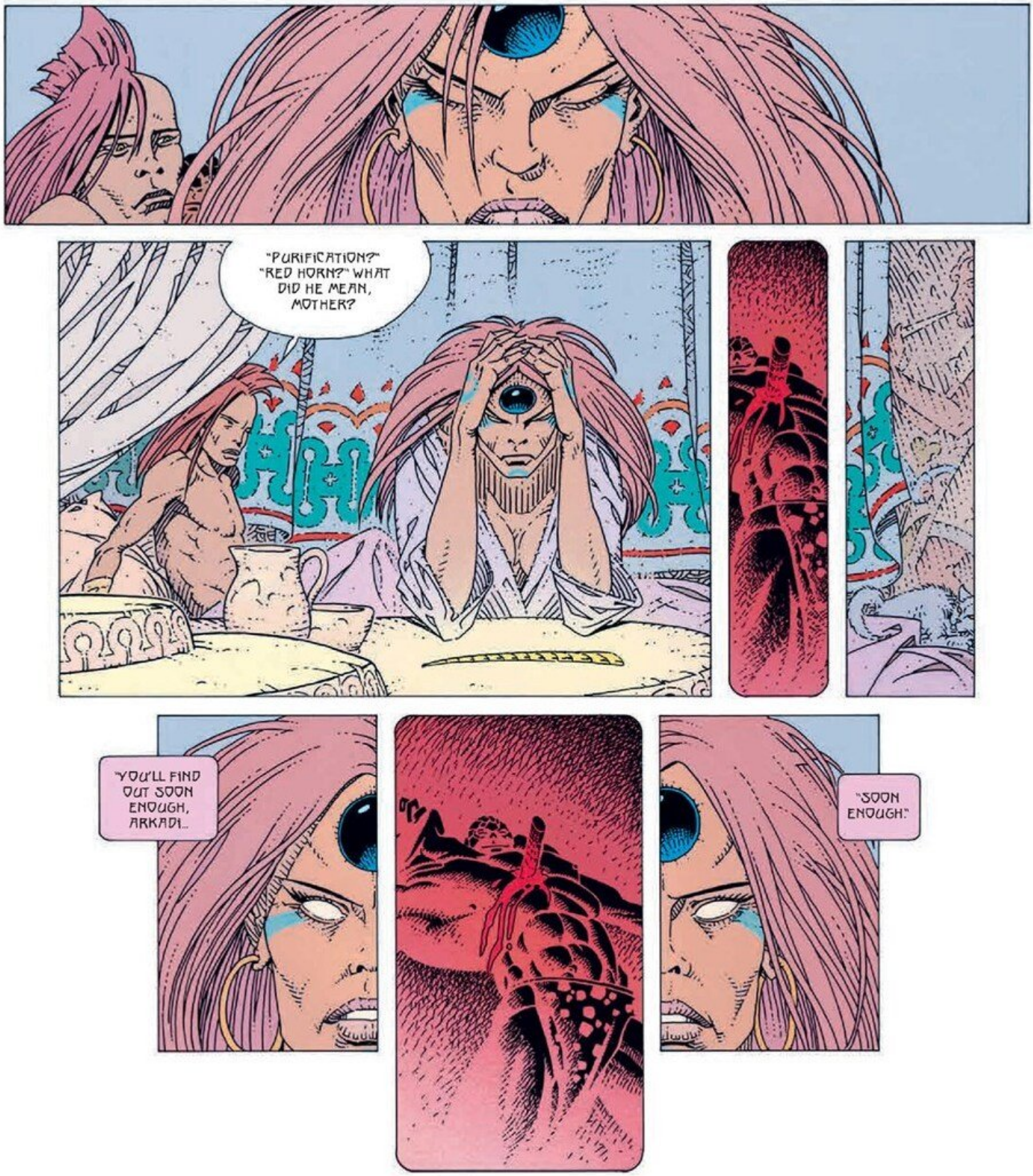
I WON'T TOUCH HIM. NO.

I WILL WAIT.

I WILL WAIT UNTIL HE REACHES...THE *AGE OF PURIFICATION!*

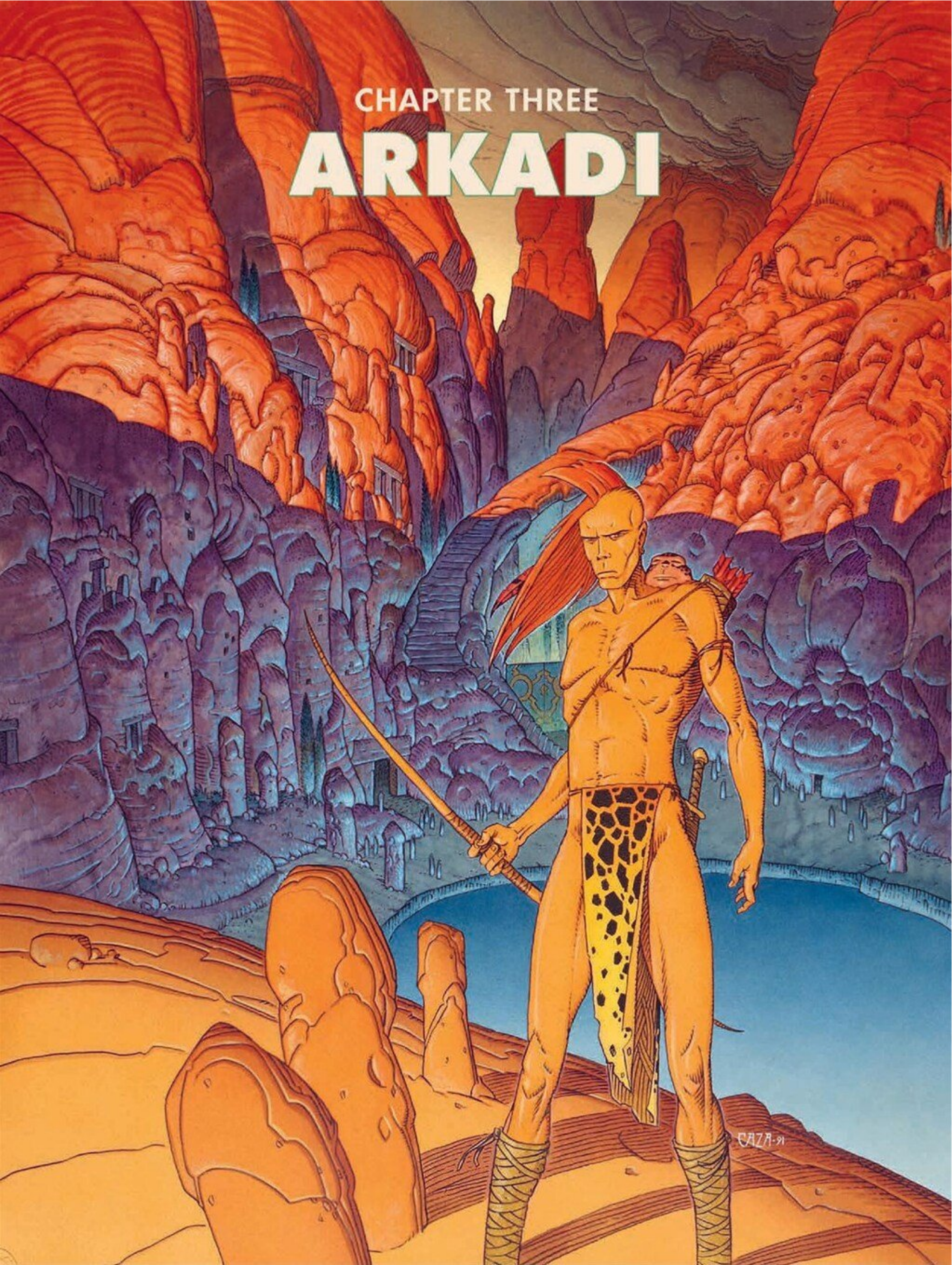
THEN, LIKE IT OR NOT, HE WILL JOIN THE OTHERS...

...ON THE *RED HORN!*


"PURIFICATION?" "RED HORN?" WHAT DID HE MEAN, MOTHER?
"YOU'LL FIND OUT SOON ENOUGH, ARKADI...
"SOON ENOUGH."

CHAPTER THREE

ARKADI



"THE TIME IS UPON US..

"...FOR THE PURIFICATION!"

DOOONG!!

IMMEDIATELY AFTER IT WAS BORN, THE *SUCKER* WAS DRAGGED BY THE WINDS...

...TOWARDS *DAY*.

HIS BLOATED ABDOMEN FILLED WITH GAS, HE LET THE SKY'S CURRENTS CARRY HIM.

IN THE CENTER OF THE LIGHT FACE OF EARTH, THE ASCENDING WINDS LIFTED HIM HIGH INTO THE SKY.

THERE, HIGH ALTITUDE WINDS BLOW IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION, PUSHING HUGE MASSES OF AIR...

...TOWARDS *TWILIGHT* AND BEYOND...

...TOWARDS *NIGHT*.

THEN, HOVERING OVER THE ETERNAL ICE LAND OF THE DARK SIDE OF EARTH, THE HIGH WINDS WEAKEN..AND FALL. AND THE SUCKER..

..STARTED TO FLOAT DOWN.

FURTHER BELOW, HE WAS PICKED UP BY *NIGHT'S* ICY WINDS..

..THAT BLEW HIM BACK TOWARDS *DAY*.

HE HAS CROSSED *TWILIGHT* ANEW.

HE NOW ENTERS AGAIN THE WARM REGION IN WHICH HE WAS BORN.

THE LAND OF THE *SALT-WINDS*.

THE SUCKER HAS GROWN AND REACHED ADULTHOOD.

HE VAGUELY KNOWS THAT HERE, IN ONE OF THE RAVINES DUG OUT OF THE "ISLANDS" OF MEDITERRA..

..SHE WAITS FOR HIM.

3

YEAR 10041 OF THE STILL ERA.

NEAR THE VILLAGE OF ACCAIA...

A SUCKER...!

THAT'S A FEMALE, SEE. SHE NEVER MOVES FROM HERE. SHE FEEDS ON WHATEVER THE WIND BLOWS HER WAY.

WHAT COULD THE WIND POSSIBLY BRING BESIDES SALT, EREVAN?

UM... THINGS FROM VERY FAR AWAY... FROM *TWILIGHT*. OR FROM *NIGHT*, EVEN.

"BEYONDER" THINGS!

AND ALSO...

MALES!

SHE HAS TO CATCH THEM MID-FLIGHT...

...AFTER WHICH...

...SLAM BAM!

AND AFTER THAT...GUESS WHAT?

SHE EATS THEM!

NOW, SOME OF THE ONES THE WIND BLOWS HERE MANAGE TO ESCAPE.

OLD MAN LAIOS MARKED ONE, ONCE...

...AND HE SAW IT AGAIN, 12 CYCLES AFTER IT FIRST BLEW HERE!

BUT THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE, EREVAN! IF THE WIND CARRIES A MALE TOWARDS DAY, HOW COULD IT COME BACK FROM NIGHT?!

THE WIND ALWAYS BLOWS IN THE SAME DIRECTION!

YEAH, YOU'RE RIGHT. BUT OLD MAN LAIOS SWEARS IT'S TRUE!

HEY...

HERE COME THE OTHERS!

"OVER THE PAST 12 CYCLES, SEVEN CHILDREN FROM ACCAIA REACHED ADULTHOOD..."

HEY, ARKADI! FEELING A LITTLE LOST WITHOUT MOMMY WITCH TO HOLD YOUR HAND?

DON'T WORRY ABOUT HIM. EREVAN-THE-ALBINO IS HERE TO WATCH OVER HIM, HAHA!

"AND THEY BEAR THE MARK OF RAD!"

I THINK THESE TWO WANTED TO BE THE FIRST TO DO THE WIND-FISHING...

...AND BEAT US TO IT.

OR MAYBE DOUBLE-CROSS US!

ISN'T THAT RIGHT, DOUBLE-HEAD?

AH! AH! AH!

HEE! HEE! DOUBLE-HEA--

IGNORE HIM, ARKADI.

EITHER WAY, I'VE GOT THE ROPES!

LET'S GO!

CAREFUL IN THE *RAVINE*. THAT'S WHERE IT *REALLY* BLOWS!

"IN THE WIND RAVINE..."

THE BEAST SEEMS PRETTY CALM...

GOOD! LET'S USE THAT!

"...THEY EMBARK ON THE FIRST STAGE OF *PURIFICATION*."

EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF!

"...WIND-FISHING."

7

I'VE GOT SOMETHING...

IT LOOKS LIKE A DRIED STRAWBERRY!

WELL, I CAUGHT A FISH!

HA! HA! SO FISH FLY NOW?!

THEN WE MUST BE FISH!

HA! HA!

?

CAREFUL! A MALE HAS ARRIVED!

...IT'S TOO HIGH!

HOLD ON! LOOK...

SCHWIISH..

PTO!

GOT IT!

CROUI CROUI

AH!

EREVAN!

AAAHH..!

EREVAN! NOOOO...!

HER ROPE BROKE...

DOOOOONG...

THE GONG!

BACK TO THE LAKE.

WE LOST EREVAN...

I KNOW ONE PERSON WHO'LL BE GLAD...

GHEVORA!

EREVAN WAS BLOWN AWAY?!

11

REJOICE!

SHE WAS WEAK OR RECKLESS...

ONLY THE STRONG...

SURVIVE!

NOW!

PREPARE THE OFFERINGS...

...AND THROW THEM...

...INTO THE SACRED LAKE!

"THESE FRUITS OF THE SALT-WIND, FULL OF BEYOND-WORLD TOXINS...

"...WILL PURGE OUR HARVEST AND OUR FISHING!

"FOR YOU CAN ONLY CURE EVIL WITH EVIL..."

WAIT... ONE PERSON'S WIND-FISHING CATCH IS MISSING...

12

HMM... LOOKS LIKE DRIED SKIN...

LET'S SEE...

BLUB

BLUB

NLOO...! NLOT THLE GRLEAT EXTLERIORL--

NLOO...!

NL...

A GHOST!

A GHOUL!

HEE! HEE! ECTOPLASM!

KILL THAT THING!

ARLGH!

PLOP!

YOU DID THIS TO MOCK ME, YOU BASTARD!

DON'T YOU TOUCH HIM, GHEVORA!

HE'S AN ADULT NOW, WITCH! HE'S MINE!

WOLVERINE

DOONG!

14

THE EIGHTH GONG!

EVERYONE, RETURN HOME.

AFTER SLEEP, AT THE SECOND GONG...

...THE SECOND CHALLENGE BEGINS.

THERE IS NO NIGHT IN THE VILLAGE OF ACCAIA.

AT THE SOUND OF THE EIGHTH GONG, THE VILLAGERS COVER THEIR FACES UNDER THE VEIL OF DARKNESS...

...AND HEAD TO THE SHADY SIDE OF THE VALLEY, WHERE THEY HAVE BUILT THE *SLEEP* HOUSES.

THEY PULL THE CURTAINS SHUT OVER DOORS AND WINDOWS.

FOR *SLEEP*.

BUT THESE TWO, THE WITCH AND HER SON, DON'T WEAR THE VEIL.

15

MOTHER?

THE FIRST CHALLENGE WAS A FERTILITY RITE, SON. AN ACT OF LIFE, WHICH IS WHY I PLAY A ROLE IN IT.

THE SECOND ONE WILL BE A DEATH RITE.

I...I AM READY.

YOU...DON'T HAVE TO, YOU KNOW. I COULD HIDE YOU.

RUN AWAY? IF I DON'T JOIN VILLAGE LIFE, WHERE WOULD I GO?

TO THE DEATH-DEPTHS...?

NO.

I'LL DO IT.

16

AR-KADI!

KRO-NO...

...WAITS FOR YOU!

N...NOOOOO!

NOO!

NH!

AR-KADI!

I'M NEVER TOUCHING IT AGAIN!

I DON'T EVEN WANT TO SEE IT...

...AGAIN!

POK!

19

i...

MOTHER... WATER...

I'LL GO FETCH SOME.

LONG AGO, SON, BEFORE YOU WERE BORN...

...I ONCE SAW, RIGHT HERE...

...A STREAK OF GOLD IN THE SKY.

ARKAS SAW IT, TOO.

20

A STREAK OF GOLD?

YES. THE TRACES OF A LEGEND CARRIED BY THE WIND. THE LEGEND SAYS THAT A PRINCE-POET JOURNEYED TO THE FROZEN HELL OF THE CITY-OF-NO-RETURN TO BEG THE GOD-MACHINES FOR THE RETURN OF HIS BELOVED.

HIS SONG WON THEM OVER.

BUT WHEN HE TURNED TO LOOK BACK AT HER, HE LOST HER AGAIN.

YOUR FATHER, ARKAS, ALSO LOOKED BACK...

ARKADI... THE ISLAND OF ACCAIA IS THE HEART OF THE WORLD. IT'S OUR HOME... AND OUR PRISON.

AND YET YOU WILL SOON LEAVE HERE.

NO, MOTHER! NEVER!

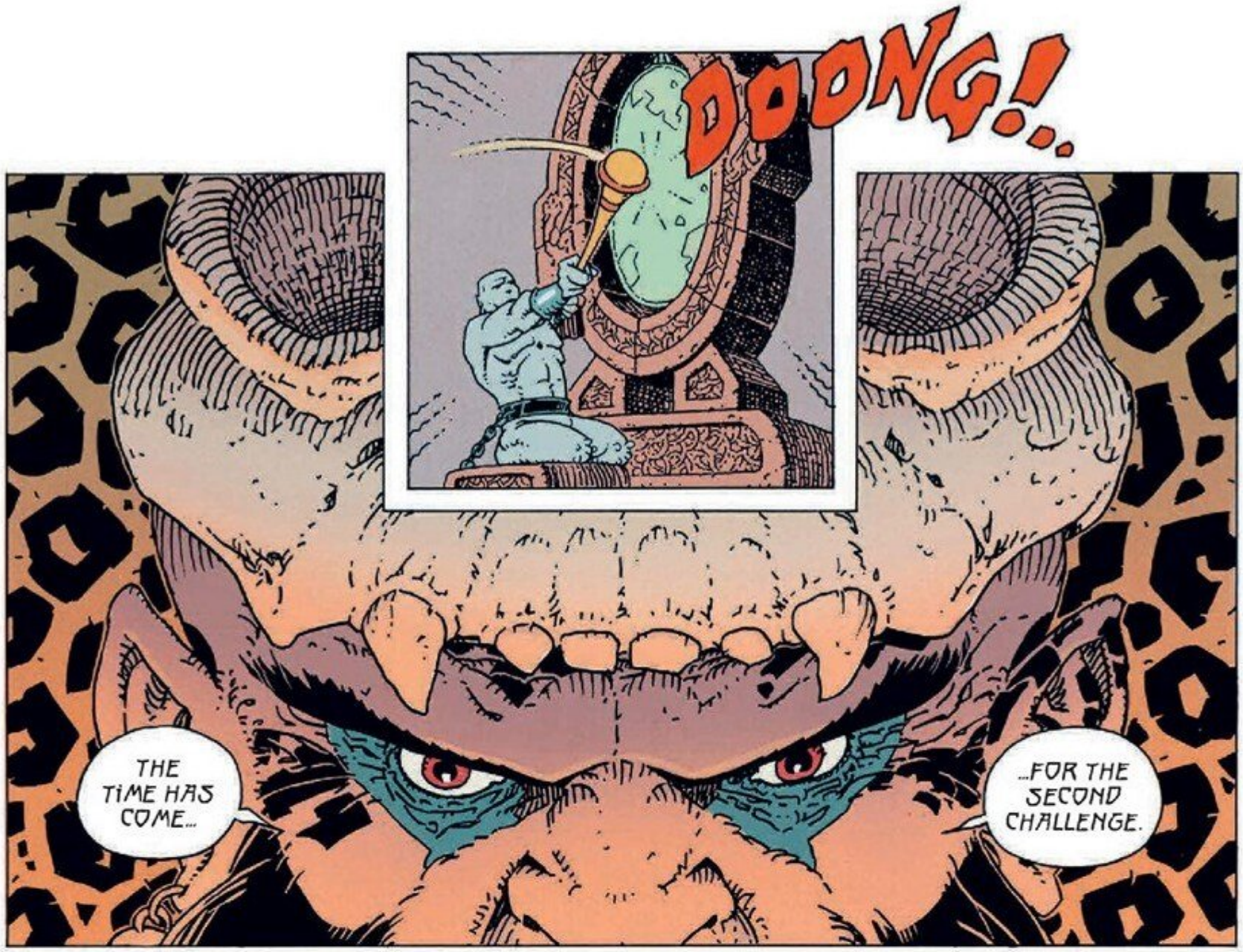
DO NOT SAY ANYTHING, ARKADI.

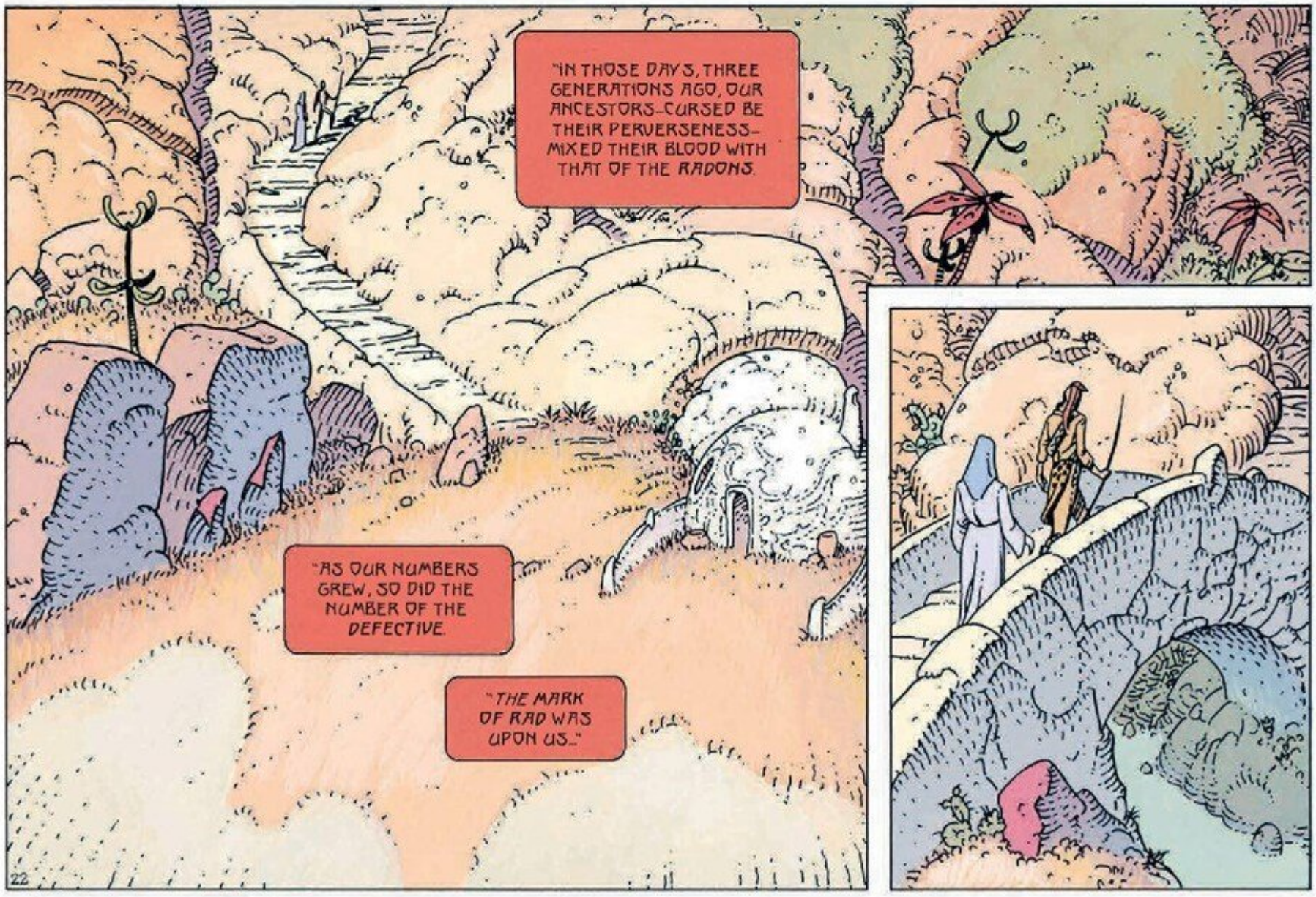
I KNOW.

YOU WERE SENT A SIGN.

DON'T LOOK BACK.

FOLLOW THE GOLD.


DOONG!..
THE TIME HAS COME...
...FOR THE SECOND CHALLENGE.


"IN THOSE DAYS, THREE GENERATIONS AGO, OUR ANCESTORS–CURSED BE THEIR PERVERSENESS–MIXED THEIR BLOOD WITH THAT OF THE RADONS.
"AS OUR NUMBERS GREW, SO DID THE NUMBER OF THE DEFECTIVE.
"THE MARK OF RAD WAS UPON US..."
22

AND SO, IN A FIT OF RAGE, THE LIGHTNING-GOD STRUCK THE MOUNTAINS AND THE WATERS WITH HIS *FIRE*...

"THE WATERS OF THE ACME, ACCAIA'S MOST PRECIOUS RESOURCE, BOILED, OVERFLOWED, AND EVAPORATED IN A BURNING MIST.

"THE FISH DIED! FRUIT WITHERED ON THE TREES AND CHILDREN ON THEIR MOTHER'S BOSOM!

"MANY OF OUR ANCESTORS PERISHED AT THAT TIME...OF HUNGER, OF THIRST, OF BURN WOUNDS!

"THAT WAS THE FIRST *PURIFICATION!*"

23

BUT GOOD CAME FROM THAT EVIL!

FOR THE LIGHTNING-GOD, WITH HIS KNIFE, HAD CHASED THE RADONS FROM OUR HOMES AND CLOSED THE DOORS OF THE SHEOL ON THEM!

THEN HE DICTATED HIS LAW TO OUR FATHERS. THE LAW OF ACCAIA.

"DO NOT GROW. DO NOT MULTIPLY.

"KEEP YOUR BLOOD PURE!"

KEEP YOUR BLOOD PURE!

24

AND SO, TO FOLLOW *HIS LAW*, THE SECOND CHALLENGE--THE RED FEAST--WAS CREATED: THE *PURIFICATION OF THE BLOOD!*

CHILDREN OF ACCAIA!

THERE ARE NOW ONLY SIX OF YOU...

...AND THE *MARK OF RAD* IS ON YOU!

YOU MUST NOW DESCEND INTO THE FOUL DEPTHS OF THE *SHEOL*.

...IN ORDER TO PURIFY YOUR BLOOD...

...BY THE ROTTED BLOOD OF THE *RADONS*.

KLOONG!..

"FOR EVIL MUST BE CURED WITH EVIL!"

RAD-ONS!

26

HNN?

TCHAC!

RAAADONS!

YAH!
YAH!

27

HNN!
HNNN!

HEE!
HEE!
ARK-
DI--

KiLL!

KiLL!

CLAC!

TCHAC!

DON'T
STEP BACK,
ARKADi!

28

WHE...?

!

AAAAAAAAAA

AH!

HEE!
HEE!
ARK-DI
FALL!

29

GIVE UP, ARK-DI...

NO! I DON'T WANT TO...

DIIIIE...

DIE!

DIIIIE!

DIE...

IE...

REAL-MAN-DIE-HNH!

NO!

SHEOL-VERY-DEEP-REAL-MAN...

DON'T...

HEE! HEE! RA-DON U-GLY!

YOU-SAVED MY LIFE...

WHY?

KILL ARK...!

NOBODY-WANTS-DIE...

REAL-MAN-OR-RADON-SAME!

I...I OWE YOU RIGHT-OF-LIFE. MY MOTHER IS A HEALER. SHE WILL TREAT YOU.

LEAD ME OUT OF THE SHEOL!

"CHILDREN OF ACCAIA! THE FOUL-SMELLING SHEOL HAS CLAIMED TWO OF YOU: NATHAN-THE-DWARF... AND ARKADI..."

"BUT YOU FOUR--KAKOS, ERYTHON, FARLOUZE AND QUARTZ--BEHOLD: BY THE ROTTED BLOOD OF THE RADONS..."

DOOOONG!..

...YOU ARE PURGED OF YOUR DEFECTS!

32

THE MARK OF RAD, WHICH WE HAD SEEN ON YOU...

THE MARK OF RAD...

...WE SEE NO MORE!

WE SEE NO MORE!

THE PURIFICATION HAS MADE YOU...

PURE-BLOOD!

...PURE-BLOODS!

PURE-BLOOD!

PURE-BLOOD!

PURE-BLOOD!

LET US REJOICE!

TOM

TOM

TOM

TOM

TOM

TOM

TOM

TOM

TOM

33

PLIK!

ARKADI!

SUCH DARKNESS IN YOU, MY SON...

MOTHER... I'VE COME BACK FROM THE SHADOWS...

PLIK!

WHAT THE..?!

I SEE WHAT YOU SEE, ARKADI...

IT WAS HORRIFIC, YES... THE VILLAGERS WENT MAD... DRUNK ON SOMA, BLOOD, AND DEATH...

THE RADONS DIDN'T FIGHT BACK... BLINDED BY THE FIRE... LIKE A SLAUGHTER HOUSE...

BLEH!

ALBE! THEY ARE REAL-MEN! JUST LIKE US! THEY SPEAK... THEY FEEL PAIN... THEY BLEED RED BLOOD!

I KNOW...

AR-KADI!

35

WEEELL? ALWAYSH THE... LASHT ONE TO... BRING BACK PREY?

I OWE THIS RADON A RIGHT-TO-LIFE!

ALBE IS GOING TO HEAL HIM!

HEAL HIM?! WHY NOT FEED HIM, WHILE WE'RE AT IT?

OR...MAKE HIM THE CLAN CHIEF!

HA! HA! HA!

PLIK!

PLIK!

COME ON! BLEED AWAY! PURIFICATION AWAITS YOU!

NO!

I AM SHE-WHO-HEALS! I WILL NOT ALLOW THIS!

HOW DARE YOU OPPOSE ME AGAIN, WITCH?!

YOU KNOW I DON'T FEAR YOU, GHEVORA!

AND I AM NOT ALONE! WE ARE TIRED OF SEEING YOU DELIGHT IN THE DEATH OF OUR CHILDREN...OR THOSE OF THE SHEOL!

36

IT'S *TRUE!* ALBE IS THE ONE WHO HEALS OUR CHILDREN!

WHO DELIVERS OUR BABIES!

WHO MAKES THE SEED GROW IN OUR FIELDS!

RIGHT-TO-LIFE!

RIGHT-TO-LIFE!

RIGHT-TO-LIFE!

DOOOONG.

WOMEN! YOU ALWAYS DEFEND PARASITES!

KEEP YOUR *ROTTED-BLOOD* FOR NOW...

THE ELDERS WILL DELIBERATE.

WE'LL PUT THE RADON IN THE *TEMPLE OF MOTHERS.* THEY WON'T ATTEMPT ANYTHING THERE.

GO TO THE HOUSE, ARKADI, AND BRING ME MY HERBS.

QUICKLY!

37

YOUNG PURE-BLOODS...

...YOU ARE ENTITLED TO PERFORM THE THIRD CHALLENGE...

THE PURIFICATION OF THE SOUL!

AFTER SLEEP, YOU WILL GO CONQUER THE *WATER OF PURITY*... THE LUSTRAL WATER FROM THE SPRINGS OF THE ACME... UP THERE... IN THE DOMAIN OF THE LIGHTNING-GOD...

...ON THE RED HORN!

AS FOR THIS ONE...

ARKADI-DOUBLE-HEAD... THE FATHERLESS-BORN...

HE GAVE A *RADON* THE RIGHT-TO-LIFE OF A *PURE-BLOOD!*

HIS RIGHT-TO-LIFE!

HIS RIGHT-TO-LIFE AS A PURE-BLOOD!

AND SO, THE RADON WILL LIVE...AND BE ENTITLED TO *PURIFICATION*. FOR SUCH IS THE LAW!

BUT ARKADI... HE WAS BORN WITH THE *MARK OF RAD*...AND WITH IT SO SHALL HE DIE.

ARK-DI WILL DIE-HEE! HEE!

39

HE WILL LEAVE THE VILLAGE. HE WILL GO INTO THE SHEOL, NAKED AND WITHOUT WEAPONS.

AND HE WILL LIVE-- IF HE CAN!--AMONG HIS STINKING BROTHERS, THE ROTTED-BLOODS!

GO! RADON!!!

NO!

NO! I WILL NOT GO ROT IN THE SHEOL...

...TO QUENCH THE HATRED OF AN OLD DRUNK!

OH!

STOP HIM!

HA!

DEATH TO YOU ALL!

YOUNG PURE-BLOODS! GET HIM!

HE'S CLIMBING THE RED HORN!

WHILE STILL IMPURE!

SACRI-LEGE!

YAH!

YAH!

YAH!

41

AH!

DOOOONG!!

THE EIGHTH GONG!

SLEEP!

SLEEP!

SLEEP!

ARKADi!

ARKADi! WAIT!

42

KRAACK!

BRAOOOOOOM!!!

KAKOS! ERYTHON! FARLOUZE AND QUARTZ! THE THIRD CHALLENGE IS POSTPONED!

AFTER SLEEP, YOU WILL CLIMB THE RED HORN, YES.

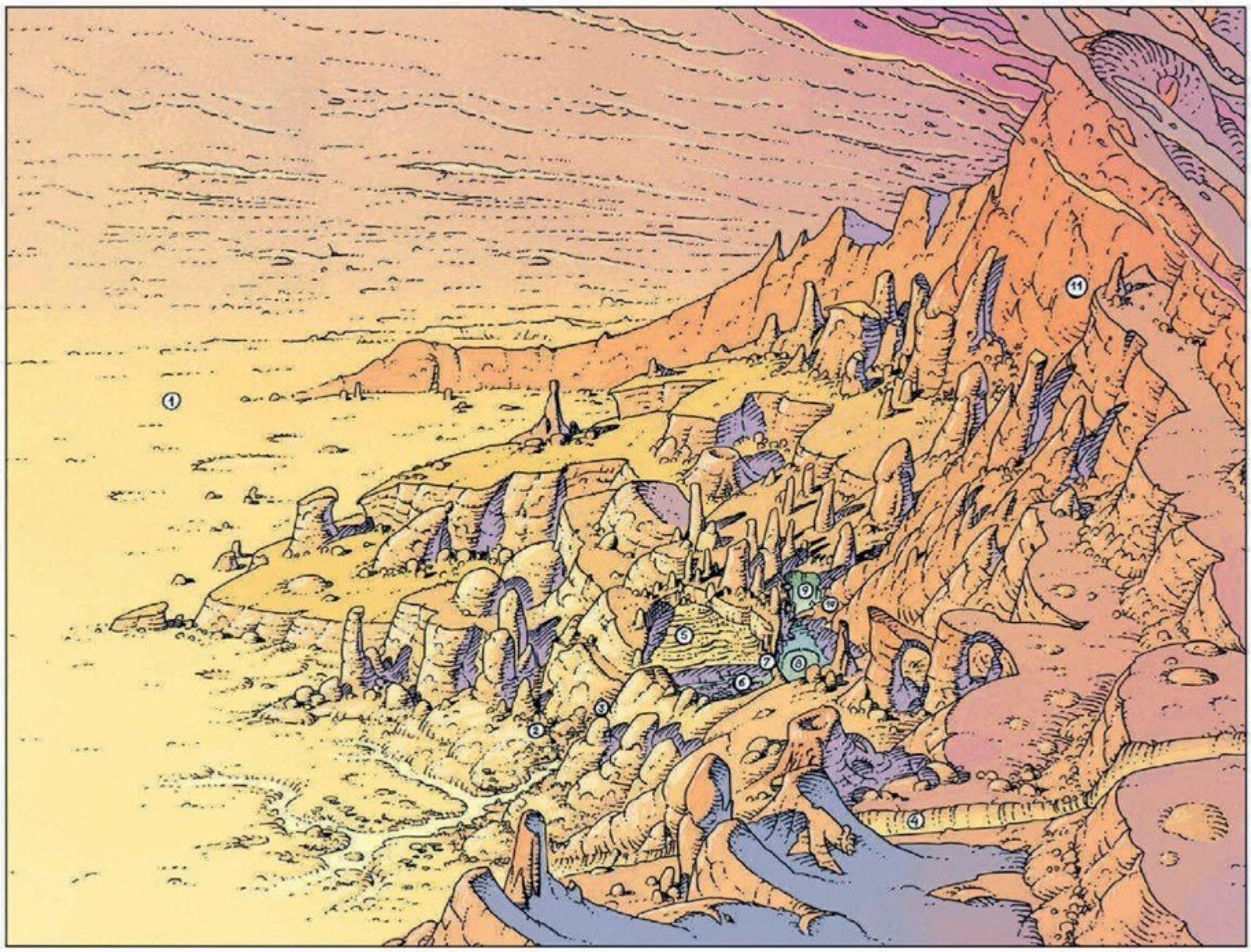
BUT WHAT YOU WILL BRING BACK...

...IS THE HEAD...

...AND THE GENITALS...

"_OF ARKADI!"

RAAAH!



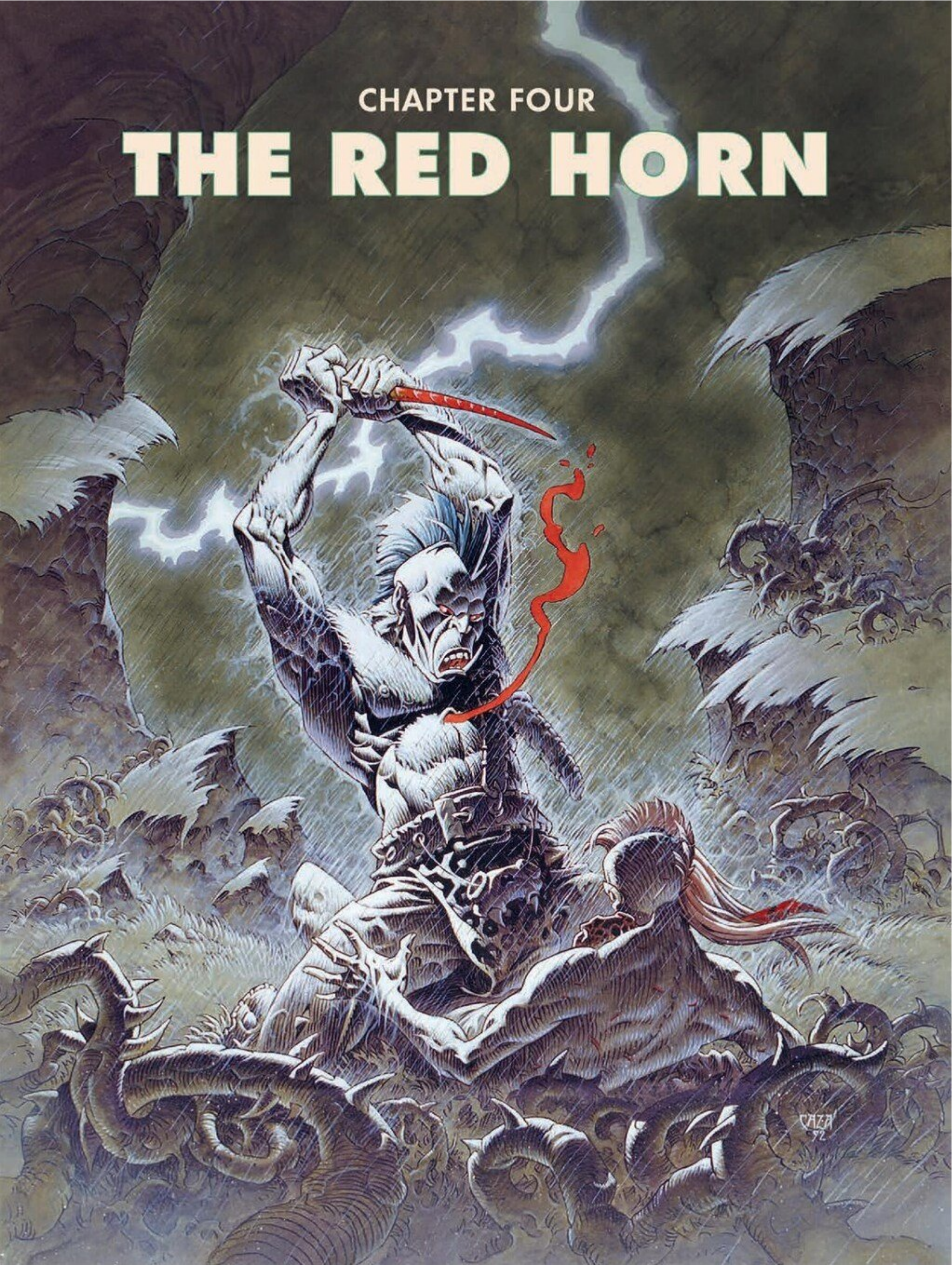
THE "ISLAND" OF ACCAIA

1. DEATH-DEPTHS
2. ALBE'S HOUSE
3. THE WATERFALL
4. RAVINE OF THE WIND
5. THE VILLAGE (CROPS)
6. THE VILLAGE (HOUSES OF SLEEP)
7. THE DAM ON THE ACME
8. THE SACRED LAKE
9. THE SHEOL
10. TOWARDS THE RED HORN
11. RED HORN MOUNTAIN

← DIRECTION OF THE WIND (TOWARDS *DAY*)

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RED HORN



ACCAIA-YEAR 10041 OF *THE STILL ERA.* AFTER SLEEP...

DOOOONG!

HOOOG!

YOUNG PURE-BLOODS!

YOU'VE COMPLETED THE FIRST TWO CHALLENGES.

YOUR BLOOD HAS BEEN PURIFIED!

BUT ARKADI TRAMPLED ON THE LAW BY EXCHANGING HIS RIGHT-TO-LIFE...

...WITH A RADON!

HE FLED, TAINTING WITH HIS ROTTED BLOOD THE SACRED DOMAIN OF THE LIGHTNING-GOD...

THE RED HORN!

AND NOW, SO THAT ORDER MAY BE RESTORED, YOU WILL ALSO CLIMB THE FORBIDDEN MOUNTAIN...

...FOR A HUNT TO THE DEATH!

"FOR EVIL MUST BE CURED WITH EVIL."

THERE ARE FOUR OF THEM AFTER ME..

..WEARING THEIR BEST HUNTING ATTIRE..

KAKOS.

ERYTHON.

FARLOUZE.

AND QUARTZ.

I'M ONE SLEEP AHEAD OF THEM..

BECAUSE I HAVE NOT SLEPT.

THEY'RE SNIFFING FOR MY TRAIL...

BUT I HAVEN'T LEFT ANY TRACKS, UNLESS...

THERE!

...IT WAS...

...INTENTIONAL

I'M THE ONE WHO KILLED THAT LONG-TOOTH.

I NEEDED HIS SKIN...

...FOR MY OWN HUNTING ATTIRE...

...AND HIS INNARDS...

...FOR MY BOW.

GROW!

ALSO, I WAS COUNTING ON THE RETURN...

ROAR!

...OF HIS FEMALE.

NOO!

AHH-- IT HURTS...! IT HURTS..

CAN YOU MANAGE, QUARTZ?

I'LL BE FINE.. NGGH! BUT..I'M OUT.

FINE. WE'LL COME BACK FOR YOU.

KILL THAT RAT!

NOW IT'S DOWN TO THREE...

ALL RIGHT, LET'S SPLIT UP TO INCREASE OUR ODDS.

EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF.

...AND THIS TIME...

...THEY'RE SCARED.

ERYTHON...

HE'S NOT AFRAID...

CLAC!

BUT HE SHOULD BE...

AAAHH!

FARLOUZE...

JAH-

I'VE GONE HUNTING WITH HIM.

SLAK!

TCHAC!

HIS EARS ARE SHARP.

AND HE'S FAST...

SWIISH...

PSST... FARLOUZE!

FCHAC!

BUT HE'S NOT VERY BRIGHT...

AND NOW IT'S JUST...

...KAKOS!

HE'S THE HEAVIEST ONE.

TCHAC!

AND THE MOST BRUTAL

NO!

GH...

...OY!

YEAH

KRAAAK!

KA-BOOM!

AH!

AGH!

NO!

ARKADI!

ARKADI...?

?

ARE YOU DEAD?

NO!

NOT...

...QUARTZ!

GHEVORA SAID...

...YOUR HEAD AND YOUR BALLS...

GO AWAY!

GO AWAY!

GO AWAY!

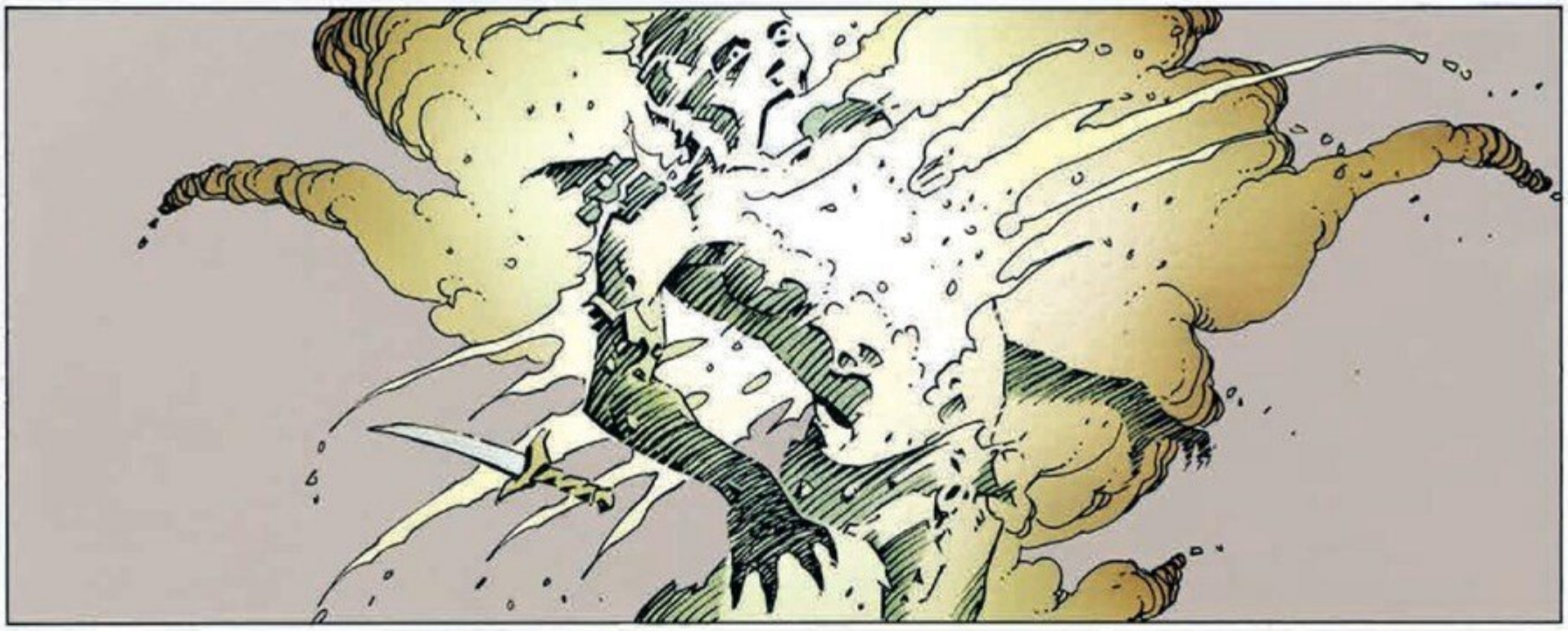
BUT HE DIDN'T SAY WHICH HEAD.

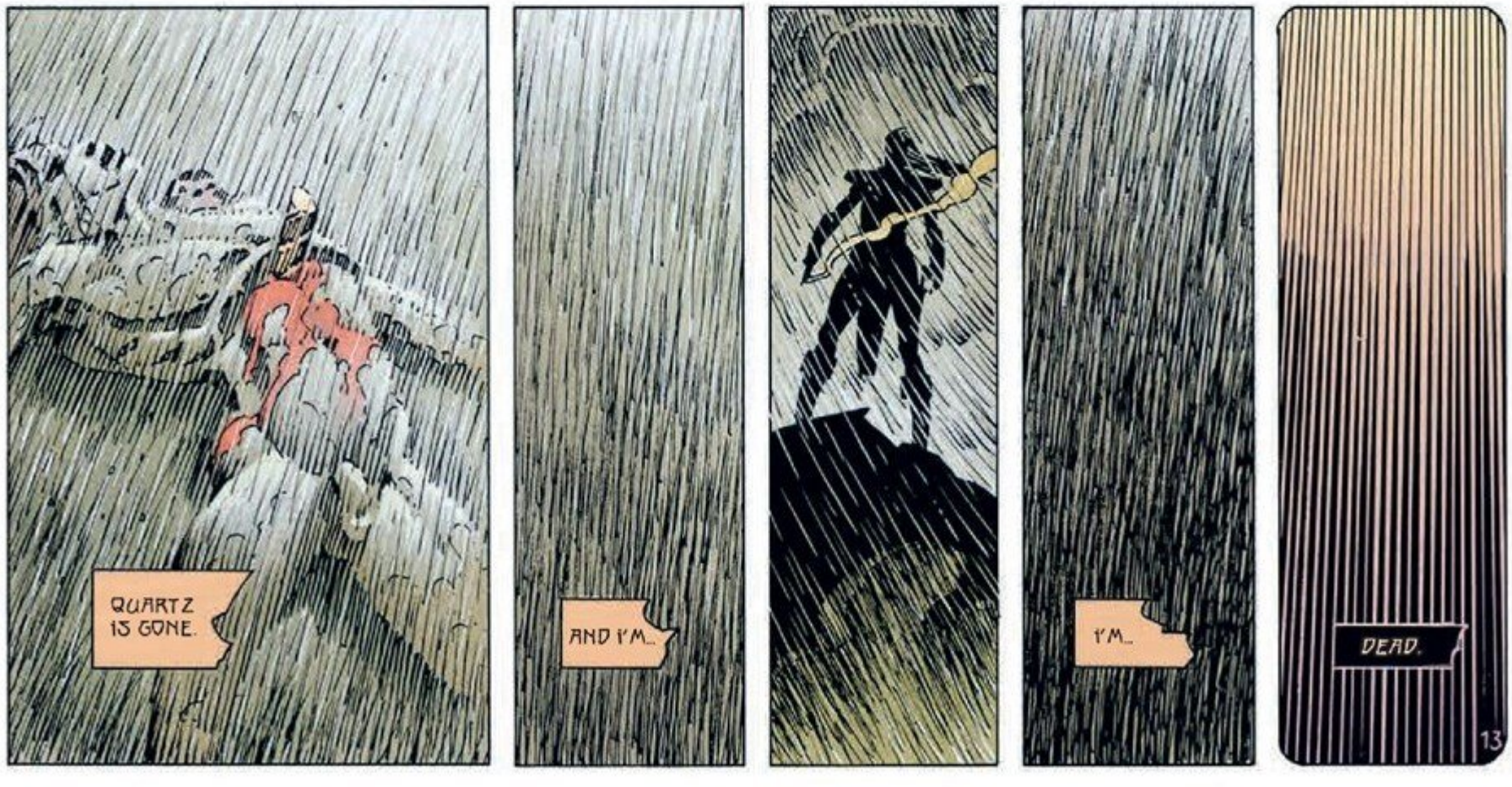
HA! HA!

I BELIEVE I'LL START WITH THE BALLS...

BANG

12




QUARTZ IS GONE.
AND I'M_
I'M_
DEAD.
13

GIVING UP SO SOON, ARKADI?

THE MAN WHO DESCENDED INTO THE SHEOL TO TAME THE DARKNESS..

THE ONE WHO DEFEATED THE FOUR EVIL ANIMALS.

WHO SPEAKS?

THE ONE WHO WAITS FOR YOU.. WHO NEEDS YOU.

THE SLEEPING GOD.

KRO-NO?

KRO-NO, YES..

IT IS TIME FOR YOU TO BEGIN YOUR JOURNEY, ARKADI.

BUT.. HOW CAN I? I..I'M..

DEAD.

MY CALL NEEDED TO STRIKE YOU IN THE HEART..

..IN ORDER FOR YOU TO AWAKEN..

..SO YOU COULD COME..

..AND WAKE ME.

ON THE ROAD THAT LEADS TO ME, YOU WILL FIND OTHER SIGNS...

AND ANOTHER GUIDE...

FEAR NOT.

THE DREAM MAKER...

OR-PHE.

REMEMBER THAT NAME.

OR...PHE...

OR-PHE?!

WHAT DO YOU KNOW OF OR-PHE? SPEAK!

15

NNH!

FLASH

GIVE UP!

POC!

17

MMM

GOOD...

SS...

...LAK!

18

SNAP!

_MORNING.

MY NAME iS PAN-DRA!

19

NOBODY COULD POSSIBLY DO... THAT!

YOUR TOY'S A LITTLE SLOW...

HERE! TAKE IT BACK.

SO, YOU'RE AWAKE.

AWAKE? I'M DEAD! I'M A GHOST! AND YOU'RE...

ME? HMM... A VALKYRIE, I'M GUESSING.

WHAT'S YOUR NAME?

I... I'M ARKADI, SON OF ALBE... AND THIS...

THIS IS "SHADOW."

"SHADOW"?! HMM... I MUST SAY, I DON'T FIND YOUR ALTER-EGO VERY ATTRACTIVE.

I LIKE HIM BETTER WHEN HE'S SLEEPING.

BUT I DO LIKE THE WAY YOU FIGHT.

AND I KNOW FIGHTING.

I DIDN'T HAVE THE HEART TO LET YOU DIE.

SAY "THANK YOU, PAN-DRA"!

BUT... I WAS DEAD!

I FELT MY HEART STOP BEATING!

20

PERHAPS YOU ALSO HAVE *TWO HEARTS*, YOUNG MAN.

I DON'T HAVE THE GEAR TO SCAN YOU, BUT EITHER WAY...

...YOUR ABILITY TO REGENERATE IS REMARKABLE.

I BET HEL AND THE BIO-DOCS OF DIS WOULD LOVE TO STUDY YOU!

"ELLE"? BIO-DOCS? DIS? I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT!

YOU'RE A *BEYONDER!* AND THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE!

HMM... I BET YOU AND YOUR PEOPLE... NEVER LEAVE YOUR "ISLAND," AM I RIGHT?

NOBODY CAN VENTURE OUT INTO THE WORLD-BEYOND! NOBODY COMES BACK FROM IT!

AND YET...

AND YET PANDRA IS HERE... A "BEYONDER."

AND YET, SO WAS MY FATHER...

YOU'VE BEEN THROUGH SOME TOUGH TIMES, HUH, YOUNG ARKADI...

EAT. WE'LL TALK TOMORROW.

21

HER NAME IS PAN-DRA...

SHE ROAMS THE WORLD-BEYOND...

SHE WEARS THINGS MADE OF METAL... AND USES WEAPONS THE LIKES OF WHICH I'VE NEVER SEEN...

I'VE NEVER MET A WOMAN LIKE HER... OR A MAN, FOR THAT MATTER.

SHE USES WORDS I'VE NEVER HEARD...

IS... IS THAT WHAT YOU USED TO KILL QUARTZ FROM AFAR?

YEP. LIKE USING A POWER HAMMER TO SMASH A FLY!

BUT TIME WAS OF THE ESSENCE! IT'S A *THOR* 357, A MUSEUM PIECE--TWELVE ROUNDS OF TNT ROCKET-BULLETS--STRIKING RANGE OF ONE KMET. A GIFT FROM HE-FAS-TUS...AND A BEAUT, AT THAT!

YOU WANNA TRY IT?

AIM AT THAT BOULDER LIKE YOU WOULD WITH YOUR BOW. NO NEED TO CORRECT THE DRIFT OR REAR SIGHT. IT FIRES STRAIGHT.

BANG!

KRAAK!

22

BY THE LIGHTNING-GOD!

OK, THAT'LL DO! I DON'T HAVE BOTTOMLESS AMMO!

I'M NOT DONE ROAMING THE WORLD YET...

AND IT'S A *DANGEROUS* WORLD!

TELL ME ABOUT THE WORLD-BEYOND.

FIRST THINGS FIRST! YOU UTTERED A NAME IN YOUR DELIRIUM...

OR-PHE...

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT OR-PHE?

NOTHING! IT'S JUST A NAME THAT CAME TO ME IN A DREAM.

LISTEN, KID!

I'VE BEEN ROAMING *THE GREAT EXTERIOR* FOR TEN YEARS LOOKING FOR HIM!

23

WITHOUT OR-PHE'S *DREAMS*, THE CITY IS DESCENDING INTO MADNESS- UNDERSTAND?

NO..

IS HE A GOD TO YOUR PEOPLE?

ARGH! I WON'T GET ANYTHING FROM THIS DEGENERATE!

SORRY! PATIENCE IS NOT MY STRONG SUIT..

HOLD ON.. MY DATABASE WILL EXPLAIN IT.

< OPEN OR-PHE FILE >

CLIC!

NAME: OR-PHE. D.O.B: YEAR 10000 OF THE STILL ERA. (INCLUDES THE BRAIN OF *THE CHOSEN* OF THE SAME NAME IN A CYBERNETIC BODY)

REMOLDED IN 10024.

ROLE: SUPPLY *DREAMS* TO THE RESIDENTS OF DIS.

PERIPHERAL SYSTEMS: MULTIPLE SENSORS (VISUAL, AUDIO, TACTILE, ETC.) RECORDING AND TRANSMISSION MODULE.

ELECTROMAGNETIC UNIT DESIGNED FOR ATMOSPHERIC FLIGHT (NOTE: STRONG POSSIBILITY THAT HIS POWER UNIT HAS BEEN DE-ACTIVATED).

24

IS THAT... A GHOST?

REALLY?! NO, JUST A HOLOGRAM. A PROJECTED IMAGE.

< CLOSE FILE >

OR-PHE IS NEITHER A GHOST NOR A GOD! HE'S A MAN...AND A POET. HE'S *THE* POET.

HE'S UNSTABLE... AND MOODY, AND ROMANTIC... A RUNAWAY AND A TRAITOR TO DIS AND *THE CHOSEN*...

...BUT HE'S *OR-PHE!*

I DON'T REALLY UNDERSTAND, BUT...

ALBE TOLD ME ABOUT A LEGEND... ABOUT A POET-PRINCE THAT WENT DOWN INTO THE DARK DEPTHS OF THE CITY-OF-NO-RETURN...

...TO BEG THE GOD-MACHINES TO GIVE HIM BACK HIS DEAD FIANCÉE.

YES! THAT'S WHAT SHE SAID!! HOW DID YOU KNOW?!

THE QUESTION IS, HOW DID *SHE* KNOW?!

MY MOTHER IS A GREAT MAGICIAN! SHE READS THE DARKNESS... SHE SEES!

PFFT!

THEN AGAIN, WHY NOT?

ALL RIGHT, ARKADI. LET'S GO SEE YOUR WITCH!

25

HNN!

RADON! NO!

HNNH...?

DON'T LEAVE!

DON'T LOOK AT THAT!

26

KTÁ!

HOOO

THE RADON!

WHAT THE...?

HOOOOOM...

MOTHER?

ALBE!

WHAT HAPPENED? WHO DID THIS?

T-THE... RA..DON... S-STOP... STOP HIM...

THE RADON?

HOOOOOON!

HE'S... GONE... MAD...

29

HON! HON!

HO HON!

HON

NOOO..

CHLAF!

RAAAADON!

30

THIS WOMAN IS GOING TO DIE..

SHE'S MY MOTHER! H-HE KILLED HER!

I'M GOING TO..

..TO KILL HIM!

DON'T--

BANG!

KRAK!

KRAK!

KRAK!

STOP IT, YOU FOOL!

HE KILLED MY MOTHER!

BRAOOOOOOOM!

31

THE WATER!

"THE ACME'S WATER..."

!

HNN!

HNN!

RADON!

"WATER OF THE SACRED LAKE..."

32

DIE!

"ACCAIA'S MOST VALUABLE RESOURCE..."

HOOOOON!

HOIN!

GAAH! HEE! HEE!

HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOON...

39

ZAG!

THE SUN!

"REMEMBER, MEN OF ACCAIA...

"ON THAT DAY, THE LIGHTNING-GOD CAME DOWN FROM THE RED HORN...

"...TO COOL HIS GLORIOUS BODY IN THE SACRED LAKE..."

THE LIGHTNING-GOD HAS SPOKEN!

SHUT UP, YOU FOOL!

YOUR LIGHTNING-GOD...

...IS PRO-ME!

WHO SPEAKS PRO-ME'S NAME?

WHO ARE YOU, BARBARIAN, TO KNOW MY NAME?

I AM PAN-DRA, HEL'S ENVOY. I KNOW YOU ARE A TITAN OF DIS... THE LIGHT BEARER.

BUT...WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

DIS... HEL... YES... HEL MUST BE ANGRY WITH PRO-ME...

HERE? THEY LOVED PRO-ME HERE. CALLED HIM LIGHTNING-GOD... YES... AND PRO-ME WARMED THEIR WATER... HE LIKED THAT.

"THE WARM WATERS FLOWED FOR A LONG TIME...

"OUR MOTHERS PICKED FRUIT TWICE THE NORMAL SIZE AND CAUGHT FISH THAT WERE ALREADY COOKED."

36

BUT... YOU SHOULD HAVE GONE BACK AFTER 100 YEARS... THE SUN OF DIS...

"THE WATER OF LIFE BECAME THE WATER OF DEATH.

PRO-ME COULDN'T FEEL THE RAYS OF THE SUN DEEP UNDER THE LAKE...

"OVER THE GENERATIONS, THE WATER COOLED...

THE PROGRAM SENT OUT THE SIGNAL, YES... BUT PRO-ME DIDN'T HAVE THE ENERGY TO GET OUT OF THIS HOLE...

PRO-ME WAITED... IN CHAINS...

THANK YOU FOR LIBERATING PRO-ME, LITTLE MAN.

AND NOW, GO.

THE SUN...

"ARKADI, DID YOU BRING BACK FIRE SALT TO WARM THE WATER OF MY LIFE?"

...IS RECHARGING PRO-ME.

IT'S CALLING HIM...

SOON, YES... PRO-ME WILL GO PLUCK THE GOLDEN FRUITS OF THE SUN...

SOON...

37

CARRY ME...

CARRY ME, ARKADI...

...HOME.

FIVE YEARS BEHIND SCHEDULE... THE SUN OF DIS MUST BE DYING BY NOW...

FIRST OR-PHE, NOW PRO-ME... MUST ALL THE TITANS FAIL AT THEIR TASKS?

HNN!

ARE YOU IN PAIN, HEAVY BEING?

BIRTH-PAINS- HNN...

SWOLLEN...

SUN-LIGHT- NOT-GOOD- FOR-RADON!

MUST-CUT- OFF-WHAT- STICKS-OUT!

CUT OFF?! BUT...

ONLY-WAY - HNN! OR-FLESH- ROTTED-BLOOD-KEEP- SPREAD-CHAOS...! CUT!

38

IF YOU SAY SO...

TCHAC!

RADON-FEEL-BETTER-
NOW_RELIEVED_

THANK-YOU-
PRETTY-
REAL-MAN!

MY NAME
IS PAN-DRA!
COME!

LET'S FOLLOW
THEM!

ME-COVER-
UP!

"WATER... THE
MOST PRECIOUS
RESOURCE...

"...IN THE WORLD."

39

IN THE UPPER ROOM...

...MY CAVE...

THE BELLY...

...OF MY MOTHER.

UNCOVER THE MIRROR.

I, TOO, SHALL SET OFF FOR THE CITY-OF-NO-RETURN...

BEYOND THE MIRROR...

...MAYBE FIND...

...ARKAS.

ALBE! MOTHER!

MOTHER! NO!

A DREAM-SCREEN!

AN ACTIVE SCREEN... HERE?!

THERE'S RECEPTION?

SO MANY THINGS ALL CONVERGING IN THIS LOUSY CITY!

IF I CAN PLUG MY DATABASE INTO THIS CONSOLE...

I CAN'T SEE A DAMN THING!

CRAC!

42

PAN-DRA! WHAT THE--?!

<ON-LINE>

CLIC!

"THIS MIRROR IS A REMNANT OF A VERY ANCIENT MAGIC...

"EACH SEES IN IT WHAT THEY MOST DESIRE..."

GOT IT!

I KNOW WHERE OR-PHE IS!

YEAR 10041 OF THE STILL ERA.

NEAR THE VILLAGE OF ACCAIA...

I...I MUST LEAVE...TO FULFILL MY MISSION. BRING BACK ORPHE.

THE RADON'S COMING WITH ME.

AND YOU?

"ACCAIA--THE HEART OF THE WORLD--IS OUR HOME... AND OUR PRISON.

"AND YET YOU WILL LEAVE IT SOON..."

...AND BATTLE THE DEATH-DEPTHS, THE SALT-WINDS... AND THE WORLD-BEYOND?

YOU SAID YOUR FATHER DID IT!

MY FATHER WAS A BEYONDER! A WARRIOR! A DRAGON-SLAYER! A...

A GIANT!

FACE IT, KID. IT'S TIME FOR YOU...

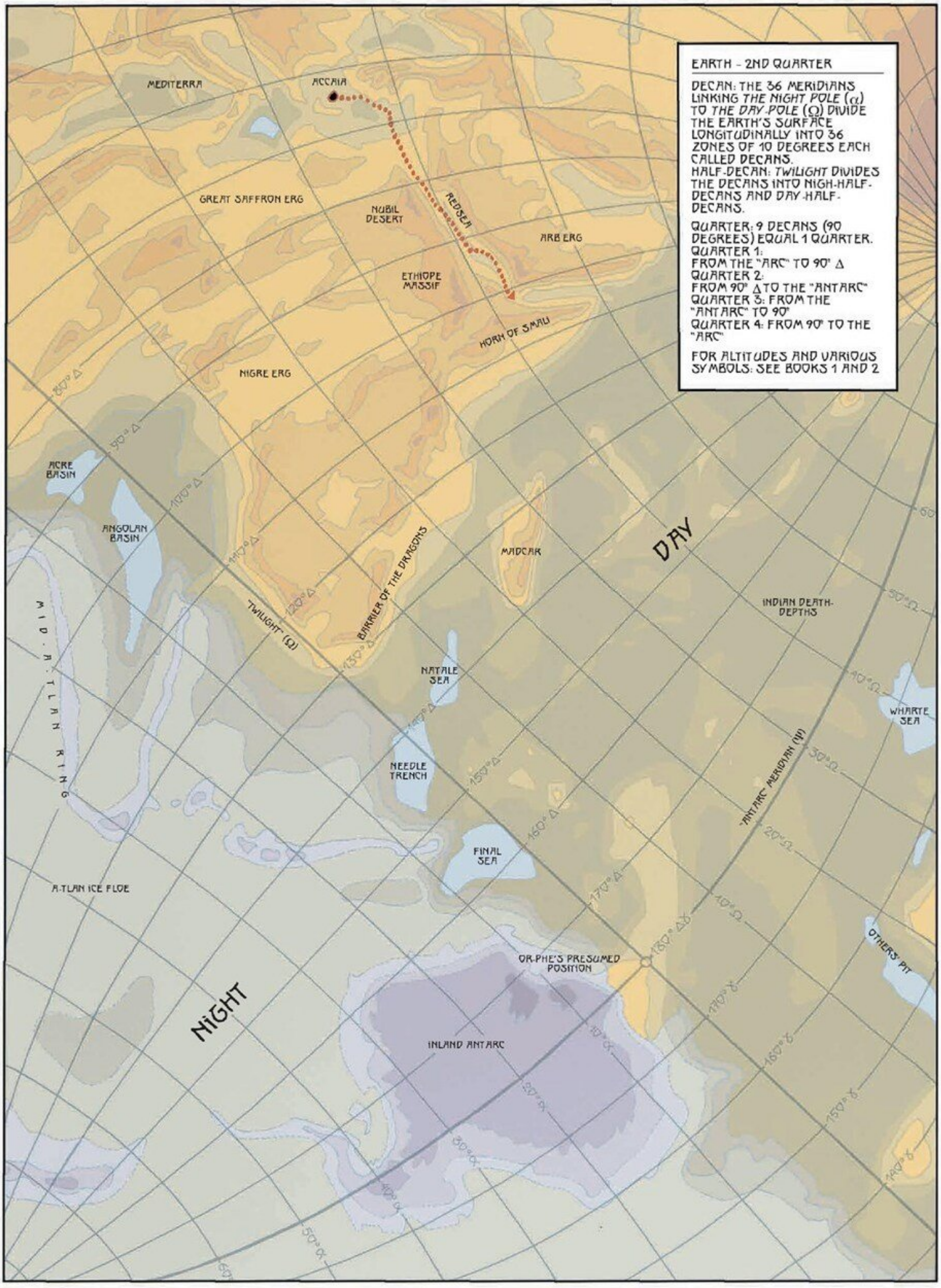
...TO GROW UP!

"DON'T LOOK BACK, ARKADI.

"FOLLOW THE GOLD."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DEAD SEA TRAVELERS


EARTH - 2ND QUARTER
DECAN: THE 36 MERIDIANS LINKING THE NIGHT POLE (α) TO THE DAY-POLE (Ω) DIVIDE THE EARTH'S SURFACE LONGITUDINALLY INTO 36 ZONES OF 10 DEGREES EACH CALLED DECANS.
HALF-DECAN: TWILIGHT DIVIDES THE DECANS INTO NIGH-HALF-DECANS AND DAY-HALF-DECANS.
QUARTER: 9 DECANS (90 DEGREES) EQUAL 1 QUARTER.
QUARTER 1: FROM THE "ARC" TO 90° Δ
QUARTER 2: FROM 90° Δ TO THE "ANTARC"
QUARTER 3: FROM THE "ANTARC" TO 90°
QUARTER 4: FROM 90° TO THE "ARC"
FOR ALTITUDES AND VARIOUS SYMBOLS: SEE BOOKS 1 AND 2
MEDITERRA
ACCAIA
GREAT SAFFRON ERG
NUBIL DESERT
REDSEA
ARB ERG
ETHIOPE MASSIF
HORN OF SMALI
NIGRE ERG
ACRE BASIN
ANGOLAN BASIN
MADCAR
DAY
INDIAN DEATH-DEPTHS
"TWILIGHT" (Ω)
BARRIER OF THE DRAGONS
NATALE SEA
NEEDLE TRENCH
WHARTE SEA
"ANTARC" MERIDIAN (W)
FINAL SEA
A-TLAN ICE FLOE
OTHERS' PIT
ORPHE'S PRESUMED POSITION
NIGHT
INLAND ANTARC
60° Δ
90° Δ
100° Δ
110° Δ
120° Δ
130° Δ
140° Δ
150° Δ
160° Δ
170° Δ
180° ΔΩ
60° Ω
50° Ω
40° Ω
30° Ω
20° Ω
10° Ω
10° α
20° α
30° α
40° α
50° α
10° δ
20° δ
30° δ
40° δ
50° δ
60° δ
70° δ
80° δ
90° δ
100° δ
110° δ
120° δ
130° δ
140° δ
150° δ
160° δ
170° δ

AND SO, STRANGER, YOU HAVE SEEN MY REFLECTION IN THE DARK WATERS OF THIS MIRROR...

COULD YOU HAVE HEARD, I'D HAVE SAID, "NO, DON'T COME. FOR I AM WELL HERE..."

BUT SINCE YOU ARE ON YOUR WAY...

I WILL WAIT...

THERE WAS A SEA HERE, BEFORE...

1

YEAR 10041 OF *THE STILL ERA*, MONTH 12. THE DEATH-DEPTHS OF MEDITERRA: 38° OMEGA, 72° DELTA.

A SALTWATER EXPANSE STRETCHING TO THE HORIZON, 1,000 AND 10,000 TIMES BIGGER THAN THE SACRED LAKE OF ACCAIA...

BLUE UNDER A BLUE SKY, DOTTED WITH GREEN AND WHITE ISLANDS, AND BOATS PUSHED BY THE WIND...

OR SO SAYS PAN-DRA.

AND NOW...

SAND, ROCKS, AND SALT! IS THIS ALL THE WORLD BEYOND IS? A DESERT?

HMM. PRETTY MUCH, YEAH. BURNING HOT ON ONE SIDE, FREEZING ON THE OTHER. AND WINDY NEARLY EVERYWHERE.

IN THE 10 YEARS--10 TIMES 12 CYCLES, AS YOU WOULD SAY-- I'VE BEEN TRAVELING, I HAVEN'T ENCOUNTERED MANY HABITABLE-- OR INHABITED--PLACES.

IN THESE DEATH-DEPTHS, JUST A FEW NOMADIC TRIBES. AND IN REMOTE, LUSH AREAS, A FEW WRETCHED VILLAGES, LIKE YOURS.

WRETCHED?! ALBE-MOTHER SAID ACCAIA WAS THE HEART OF THE WORLD!

PFF! EVERY VILLAGE I EVER SAW BELIEVED IT WAS THE HEART OF THE WORLD...

DON'T THEY THINK THAT IN DIS, TOO?!

DIS IS DIFFERENT.

IT'S A SPHERE OF LIGHT IN THE MIDST OF THE DARKNESS... A "HEART," YES... BUT A FROZEN ONE.

YOU'LL SEE... IF YOU FOLLOW ME THERE.

NOW WALK!

"WALK..." WE'VE BEEN WALKING FOR ALMOST ONE CYCLE...

I BET PAN-DRA COULD WALK DAYS ON END WITHOUT RESTING. BUT NOT US.

LUCKILY, SHE AGREES TO TAKE BREAKS, OUT OF THE SALT-WINDS WHENEVER POSSIBLE...

...ON THE BANK OF A LAGOON, WHEN WE FIND ONE.

THE WATER IS SO SALTY THAT EVEN THE FISH FLOAT.

EASY PREY.

ALMOST READY, PAN-DRA.

BE RIGHT THERE...

...WITH WATER.

SHE CALLS THIS "FILTRATION BY REVERSE OSMOSIS."

NATURALLY, THAT'S ALL GIBBERISH TO ME!

THE MAIN THING IS THAT IT MAKES DRINKING WATER.

"WATER... ACCAIA'S MOST PRECIOUS RESOURCE... THE MOST PRECIOUS RESOURCE...IN THE WORLD."

WE DRINK.

HOW'S THE FISH?

TOO SALTY-- HNN!

WE EAT.

AND WE SLEEP IN THE SHADE, WHEN WE CAN FIND IT...

AFTER SLEEP WE'LL BE ENTERING THE REDSEA.

5

THE RADON...

ALREADY ASLEEP, DESPITE HIS... QUIVERING FLESH.

IT'S LIKE HE FORGOT WHAT HE DID... ALBE...

MY MOTHER... DEAD. I SHOULD HAVE KILLED HIM FOR THAT.

BUT I COULDN'T...

SLEEP? I'M AFRAID I'LL SEE KRO-NO IN MY DREAMS AGAIN.

OR WORSE... THE LEAD GOLEMS... THE ONES MY MOTHER CALLED "LEGION."

"SHADOW" SLEEPS FOR US BOTH.

PAN-DRA NEVER SLEEPS. FOR HER, REST MEANS PLUGGING HER MASK INTO HER "BOX."

THEN SHE ENTERS A TRANCE, AS IF DRUNK ON SOMA.

WHAT DOES SHE SEE? HER CITY OF LIGHT IN THE HEART OF NIGHT? HER TITAN OR-PHE?

YEAR 10041 OF THE STILL ERA, MONTH 12. THE BOTTOM OF REDSEA: 38° OMEGA, 76° DELTA.

DAY 26 OF WALKING.

"WHAT'S *REDSEA?*"

"YOUR BOX?"

"AT OUR NEXT STOP, MY DATABASE WILL SHOW YOU."

"YES. IT'S AN EXTENSION OF HEL. IT'S FULL OF INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE ABOUT *THE GREAT EXTERIOR.*"

KNOWLEDGE. RIGHT...

I WAS CAST INTO THE WORLD-BEYOND LIKE A MOONSTONE...

...WITH NO KNOWLEDGE.

FOSH!

AH!

MASS DAMMIT! ANOTHER FIRE-FLARE!

FOOSH
POC!
POC!
FOOSH
PAN-DRA! RADON! HELP ME!
NO!
HOON!
PLOF!

CHOMP!

FOM!

HFF..HFF..
THANK YOU, RADON..
I OWE YOU RIGHT-OF-
LIFE..AGAIN..

HNN-HNN! FIRE-FLARE... BOOM!

NOPE... NO WAY I COULD EVER KILL HIM NOW.

WE'VE WASTED ENOUGH TIME. LET'S GO!

WALKING... WHAT ELSE IS THERE?

EDUCATING OURSELVES...?

THIS IS A MAP. A SIMULATION OF A PART OF THE WORLD.

OR-PHE IS AT THE POINT INDICATED BY THE CURSOR. AT THE INTERSECTION OF THE *ANTARC MERIDIAN* AND THE "GREAT CIRCLE," *TWILIGHT*.

HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT?

LET'S CALL IT... FEMININE INTUITION. WHEN I WAS ABLE TO CONNECT TO THE NETWORK, IN YOUR HOME, IT HIT ME! NO MATTER WHERE OR-PHE IS HIDING, HE MUST HAVE A DREAM-SCREEN. HE CAN ONLY BE IN A KEY LOCATION IN THE NETWORK!

AND THEN I SAW HIM, IN YOUR MOTHER'S "MAGIC MIRROR!" AND MY DATABASE RECORDED HIS DATA.

LOOKS LIKE THE FEW SCREENS THAT ARE LEFT IN THE WORLD ARE STILL INTER-CONNECTED.

AS FOR WHAT'S THERE, IN THAT PRECISE *NEXUS* OF THE NETWORK, I HAVE NO IDEA. BUT THAT'S WHERE OR-PHE IS!

THIS IS WHERE WE ARE.

BASICALLY, WE HAVE 15,000 KMETS TO GO IN THE DELTA DIRECTION... MEANING, WE KEEP THE SUN TO OUR LEFT AT ALL TIMES.

WE GO THROUGH THIS TRENCH HERE, THE *RED-SEA.*

BUT THAT "SEA"--THOSE *SEAS* YOU SPEAK OF-- WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM?

HOW SHOULD I KNOW?! I JUST KNOW THAT IN THE DISTANT PAST, THERE WERE SEAS HERE...

...AND NOW THEY'RE GONE.

THE NAMES ARE STILL THERE... AS ARE A FEW LAGOONS...AND THE SALT.

CLIC

PLUS, THESE BLASTED MAPS ARE OBSOLETE. PROBABLY A THOUSAND YEARS OLD. THERE'S EVEN LESS WATER THAN WHAT THEY INDICATE.

HEL DOESN'T FOCUS ENOUGH ON *THE GREAT EXTERIOR.* I BET HER PROBE-BOTS GOT LOST IN THE WILDERNESS...**

"OBSOLETE?" "PROBE-BOTS"?

BUT... WHAT IF THIS KEEPS UP... WHAT IF THE WATER DISAPPEARS ENTIRELY FROM THE WORLD?!

YEP. THAT'S A POSSIBILITY. BUT EVEN SO, DIS WOULD SURVIVE. IT'S SURROUNDED BY MILLIONS OF TONS OF ICE.

DIS, YES! BUT WHAT OF THE REST OF THE PLANET?!

HEL WOULD TELL YOU THE REST OF THE WORLD IS *NOTHING*... A FEW BARBARIAN, DEGENERATE PEOPLES ROAMING ABOUT THE CHAOS. BUT...

YOU'RE THE ONE WHO'S RIGHT.

HEL, HER MAPS, MY "BOX," AS YOU CALL IT--IT'S ALL MACHINE! STERILIZED KNOWLEDGE PLACED UNDER THE GUARDIANSHIP OF AN ISOLATED "ELITE."

HEL DOESN'T KNOW THE REAL WORLD BECAUSE HEL DOESN'T *LIVE* IN THE WORLD.

I DIDN'T LEARN ABOUT THE REAL WORLD FROM *HEL'S* MEMORIES, BUT ON MY OWN, IN MY SKIN, IN MY MUSCLES, IN MY BONES. IN THE TEN YEARS I'VE SPENT ROAMING THIS EARTH!

JUST AS YOU ARE DOING NOW.

YEP. YOU ALREADY KNOW MORE ABOUT THE WORLD THAN THAT BLASTED MACHINE!

BUT YOUR BOX...

IT COULD INFORM ME... TEACH ME EVERYTHING IT KNOWS.

HMM. WE'LL SEE ABOUT THAT.

SLEEP WELL.

12

YEAR 10042 OF THE STILL ERA, MONTH 1. REDSEA 40° Ω, 85° Δ

DAY 41 OF WALKING.

WE WALK EVER DEEPER INTO THIS WATERLESS "SEA..."

ALWAYS KEEPING THE SUN TO OUR LEFT...

...TOWARDS "DELTA."

RADON... IT LOOKS LIKE...

IT'S STARTING AGAIN, HUH?

SWOLLEN-LEG-HNN! FLESH-BLOOD-ROTTING! CURSE-OF-RAD!

WHAT DO WE NEED TO... CUT OFF NEXT?

NO! NOW-IS-I-FEEL-DIFFERENT.

"CAN YOU STILL WALK?"

"HNN!"

QUESTION...
...CRRR...
...STION...

HAVE YOU SEEN OR-PHE?
WHAT?

MASS DAMMIT! I'M LOSING MY MIND!

_PROBE NO. 3... CRRRR... FROM DECAN 9... T... CRRRR... EARTH... LEFT DIS IN YEAR 10... CRRRRR... 25... OF THE STILL... CRRRR... ERA... PROGRA... CRRRR... SEARCH... EARCH...

QUESTION... STION... STION... STION...

HAVE YOU SEEN OR-PHE...PHE... PHE... PHE...?

A GOLEM!

FUNNY - HNN!

IT'S A PROBE-BOT! A DAMN PROBE-BOT!

YOU SEE THIS THING, ARKAD? IT LEFT DIS BEFORE YOU WERE BORN.

NO NEED TO SHOW OFF, ROBOT.

F NO. 3... CRRRR... EARTH... EFT ... CRRRR... 25 ...AS... CRRRR... ...R... SEARCH... ...R-PHEEE...

I'M AFTER OR-PHE, TOO!

CRAC!

WHY'D YOU DO THAT?!

TO EASE ITS SUFFERING...

_AND RECOVER HIS C.P.U.

HE COULD STILL TALK. THE LITTLE JUICE LEFT IN HERE CAN HELP US.

"JUICE"?

I LIKE IT HERE. NOW, LET'S EAT. THEN, A BIT OF SPORT.

"SPORT?"

KEEP YOUR GUARD HIGHER!

IF NOT_ _YOU'RE DEAD!

TAC!

DEAD TIRED, YEAH.

WE WALKED TWO WHOLE DAYS!

WELL, I'M NOT TIRED!

HE'E...

YOU NEVER GET TIRED!!

16

YOU'RE RIGHT. I'M SORRY.

SOME-TIMES I FORGET I'M...

"...SPE-CIAL."

PLOF!

ARE ALL THE PEOPLE OF DIS LIKE YOU?

LIKE ME?!

AH! HA! HA!

THE CHOSEN? NO! THEY'RE SMALL, PALE, LYMPHATIC... ALWAYS OUT OF IT IN BETWEEN *DREAMS*.

I EVEN SUSPECT THEY'RE SLIGHTLY STUPID.

YOU'RE TEN TIMES BETTER THAN ANY ONE OF THOSE WHITE SLUGS!

I...I DON'T GET IT. AREN'T YOU ONE OF THEM?

THEM? OUCH!

I MEAN... YES AND NO. IT'S HARD TO EXPLAIN. BUT AFTER TEN YEARS IN *THE GREAT EXTERIOR*, I CAN TELL YOU ONE THING, ARKADI...

IF ACCAIA IS, AS YOU SAID, THE HEART OF THE WORLD, THEN DIS IS ITS ASSHOLE!

WHEN I LEFT DIS, OR-PHE HAD BEEN MISSING FOR SEVEN YEARS..

..CAUSING THE DREAM-SCREENS TO GO BLANK.

"A GOOD THOUSAND CHOSEN ONES HAD ALREADY CONTRACTED THE GIBBERING FROTH AND BEEN PLACED IN HALF-LIFE, I.E. ARTIFICIAL SLEEP UNDER ICE."

"'ICE?'"

"YOU CAN'T FATHOM WHAT THAT IS...? WATER HARDENED BY THE COLD.

"FOR THE OTHERS, THE STILL-FUNCTIONING PSYCHO-DOCS WERE TRYING TO FIND DREAM SUBSTITUTES."

BUT CREATIVITY WAS NEVER THEIR STRONG SUIT..

THEY WENT DIGGING THROUGH HEL'S MEMORIES IN SEARCH OF ANCIENT PASTIMES FOR THEIR CHOSEN.

"THEY WOULD MAKE THEM PAINT THE WALLS AND CORRIDORS, PRUNE THE ROSE BUSHES AND THE BOX TREES..

"..SIFT THROUGH LENTILS, KNIT, COMPILE STATISTICS.."

HA! HA!

CAN YOU PICTURE ME KNITTING?

YEAR 10042 OF THE STILL ERA, MONTH 2. 42°Ω, 92°Δ

DAY 56 OF WALKING...

...RADON?

RADON! WHA... WHAT'S WRONG?

HNN!

...CAN-WALK-NO-MORE... TOO-HEAVY-HURTS... EVEN-BONES-MOVE-INSIDE...

...LEAVE ME! KEEP-WALKING!

BUT...

GO, I-SAID! NOT-PRETTY-SIGHT...

I'LL... I'LL GO GET PAN-DRA!

PAN-DRA!

SOME-THING'S COMING...

"A CARAVAN OF NOMADS... I'VE ENCOUNTERED THEIR TYPE BEFORE... WARRIORS FROM THE DEATH-DEPTHS..."

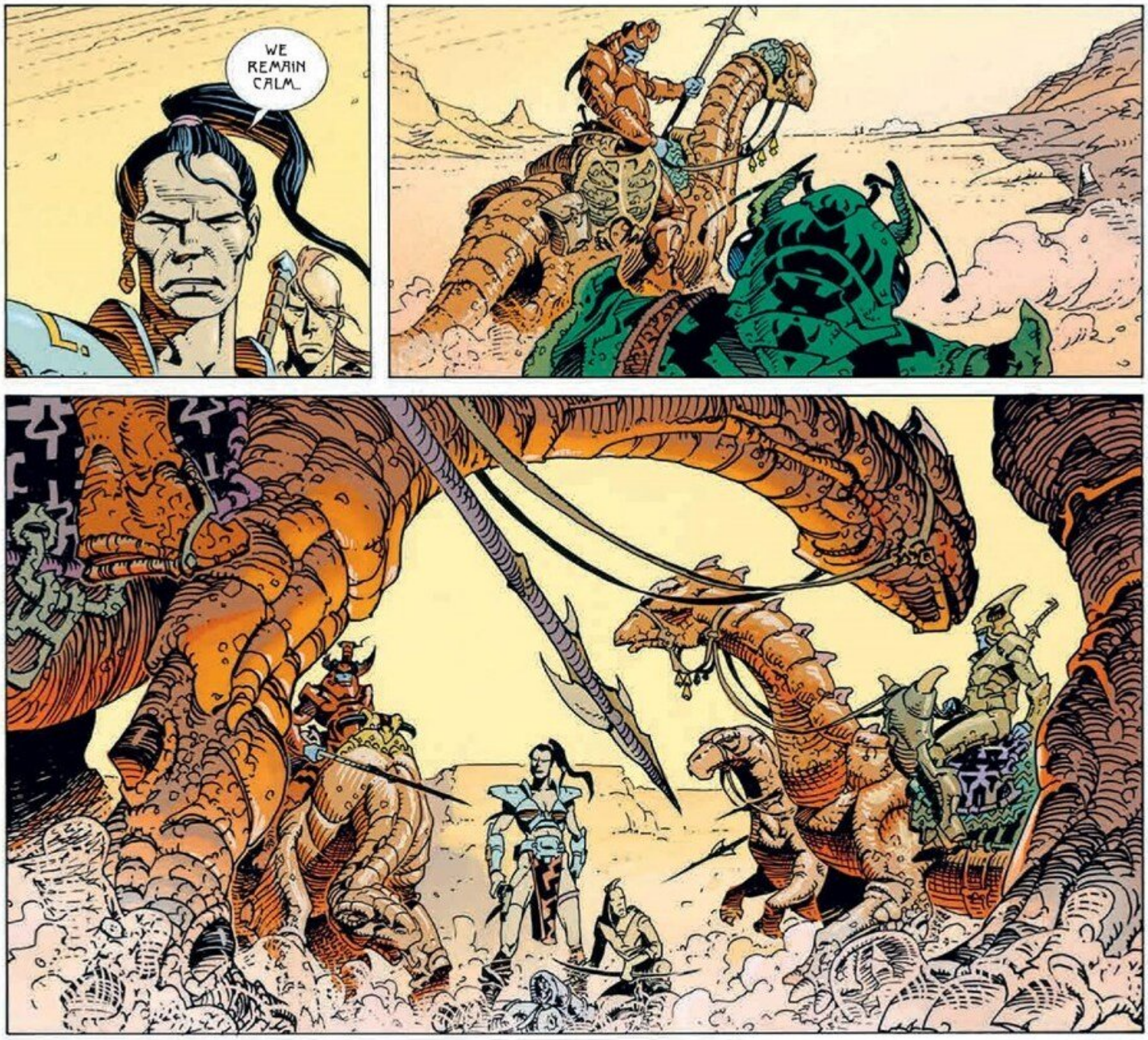
"WAR... WARRIORS?"

"YEP. TRIBES FIGHT ONE ANOTHER FOR A FEW ACRES OF SAND... THEY'RE CRAZY.

"AND VERY DANGEROUS!"

"WHAT... WHAT DO WE DO?"

20


WE REMAIN CALM.

VERY CALM!

WHAT ARE YOU DOING ON THE LAND OF THE TRIBE OF RHEG?

WE JOURNEY IN PEACE, LORD RHEG... WE ARE FOLLOWING THE REDSEA TO VISIT A FRIEND.

NOT A GOOD ROUTE ON WHICH TO VISIT FRIENDS, WOMAN!

YOU ARE JOURNEYING TOWARDS THE SINKING-LAND...AND THE GREAT SALT LAND OF THE GULF OF ADEN...

HOME OF THE GROUND-EATER...

WE ARE IN DIRE NEED OF TRANSPORTATION, O GREAT CHIEF... A RIDE OR A CHARIOT... WILL YOU SELL US ONE?

OUR THOATS ARE TOO VALUABLE... AND WARHOON WARRIORS DO NOT BUY OR SELL!

WHAT WE HAVE, WE GET...BY CONQUEST!

BUT ALL I SEE HERE IS A WOMAN AND A CHILD...

WHO WILL FIGHT?

I WILL, OF COURSE.

BLASPHEMY! IN OUR TRIBE, FEMALES ONLY COOK AND OPEN THEIR LEGS...

BUT...

...THIS COULD BE FUN...

FORM THE CIRCLE!

BARKESH!

SHE'S ALL YOURS!

OY!

ZWISH!

BARKESH

BARKESH

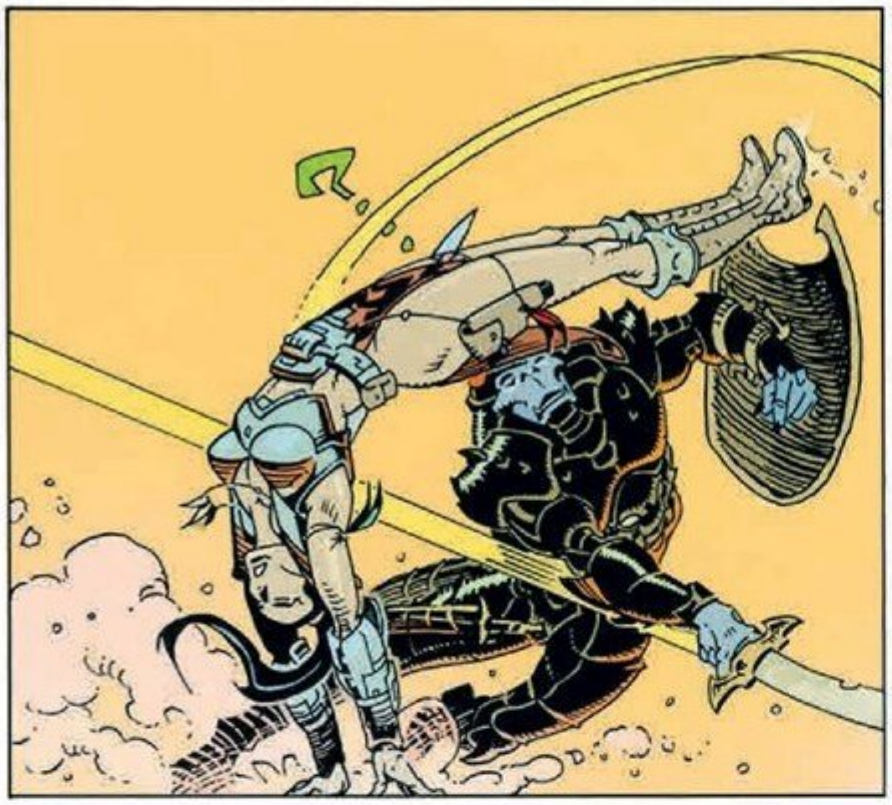
BARKESH

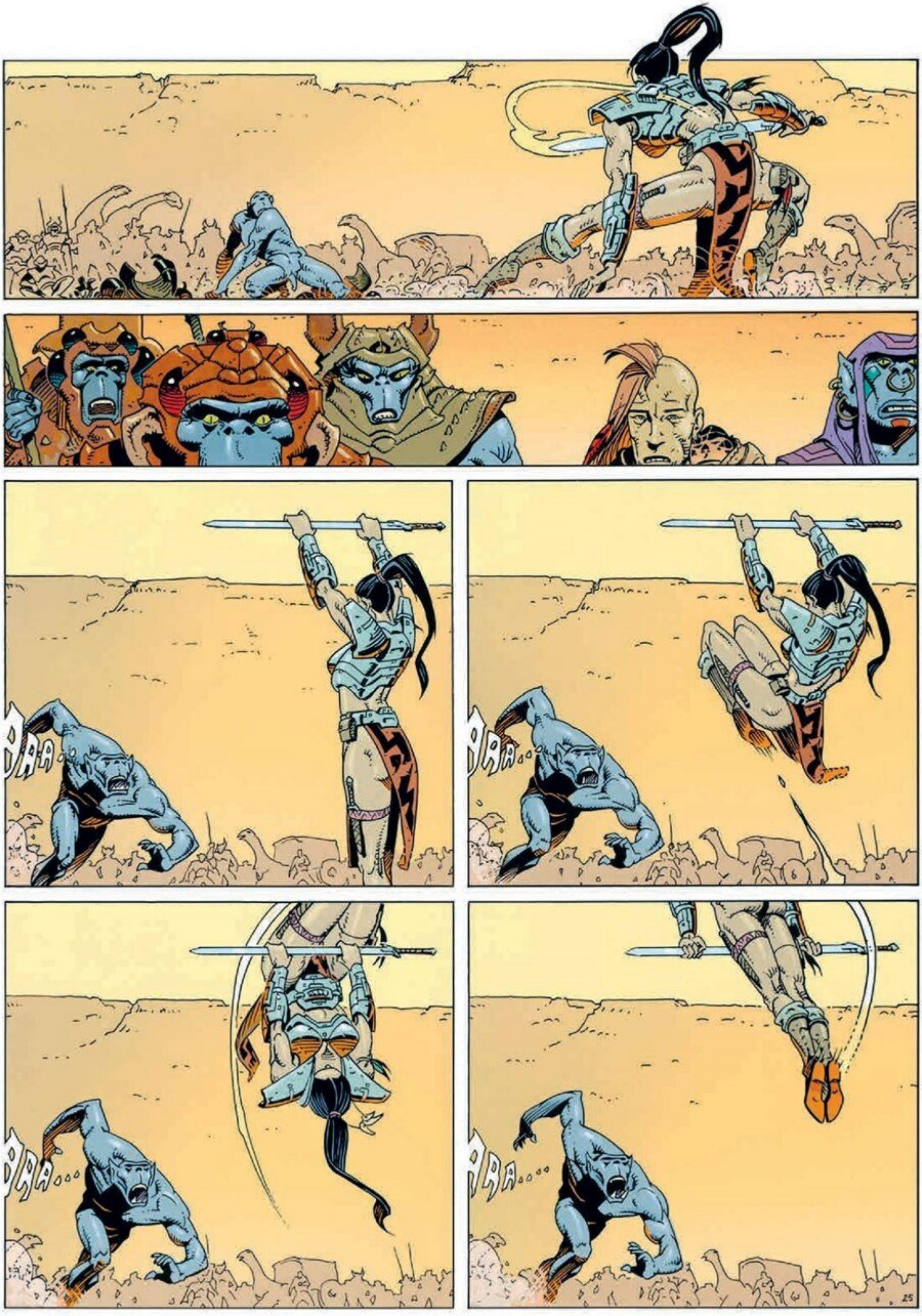
BARKESH!

YAAH!

BARKESH!

BARKESH!




AAA...
AAA...
AAA...
AAA...
25

KTÄ!

H! H! H!

TCHAC!

WELL, CHIEF? HAVE I EARNED THAT THOAT?

SH-SHE WON BY SORCERY!

KILL THEM!

ARK! HERE!

CH'LAF!

STAY BEHIND ME!

HNGH!

PAN-DRA! YOUR LIGHTNING-WEAPON!

ONLY IF THINGS GET *REALLY* BAD!

HOOOOON...

?

?

?

HOOOOOOON...

HOON!

R-RADON!?

ARKADI! PAN-DRA! THIS WAY!

HOOON.

YOP!

HA! HA!

HNN! HNN! HNN!

YOU HID YOUR METAMORPHOSIS SKILLS FROM US, RADON!

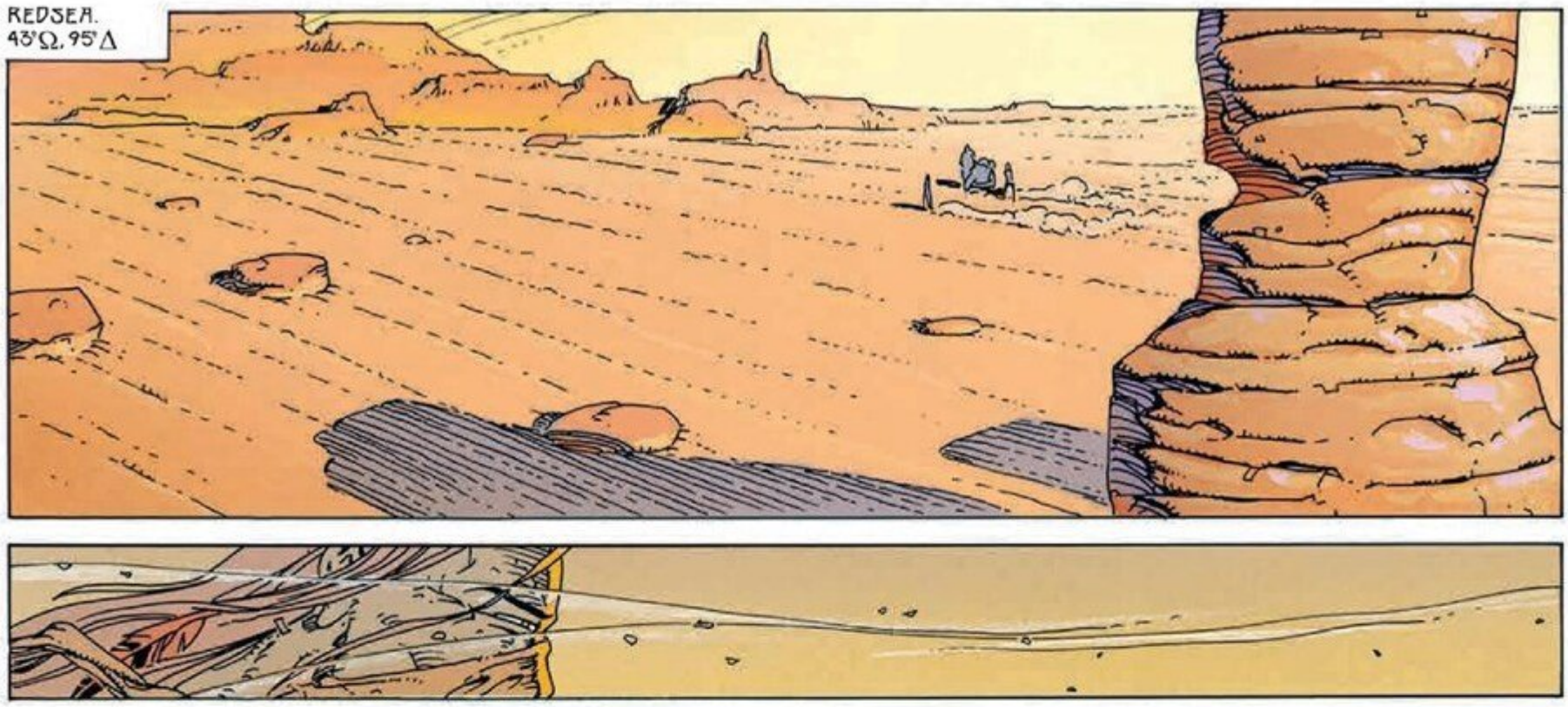
HNN! HNN! HNN!

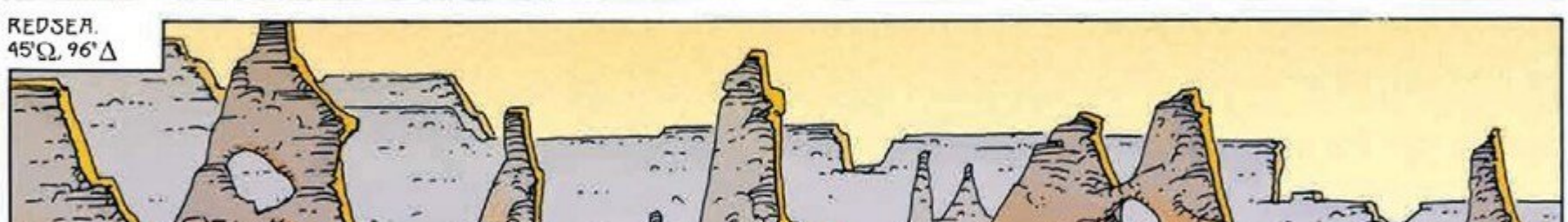
IF I-HAD-KNOWN-MYSELF! HNN-HNN!

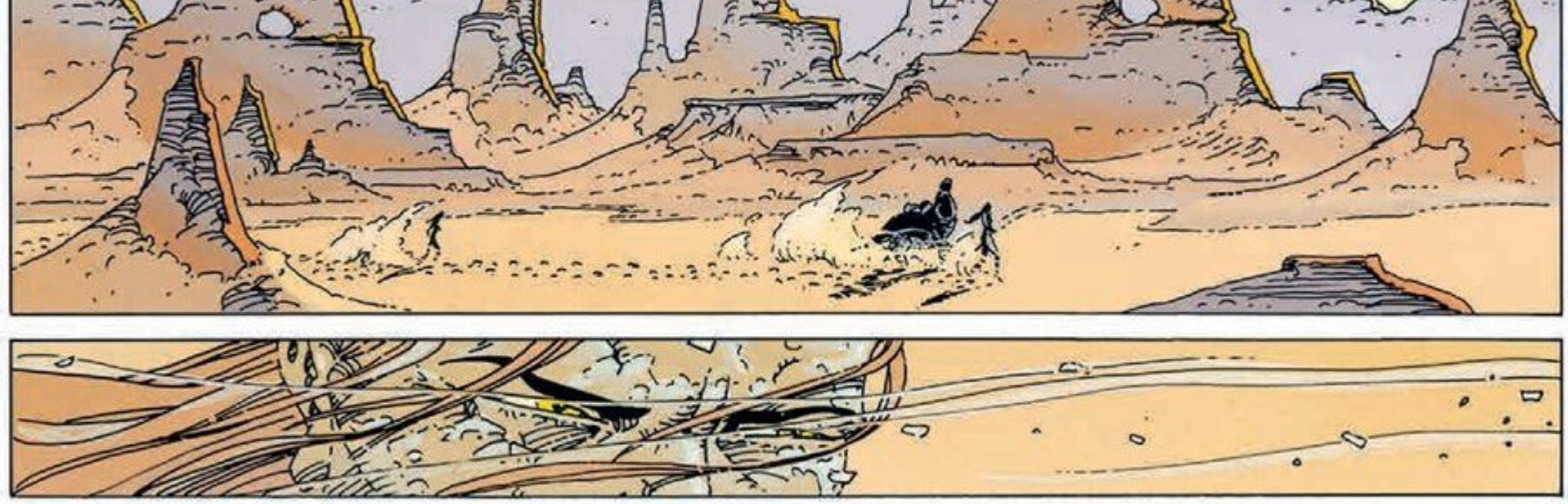
AM GOOD?

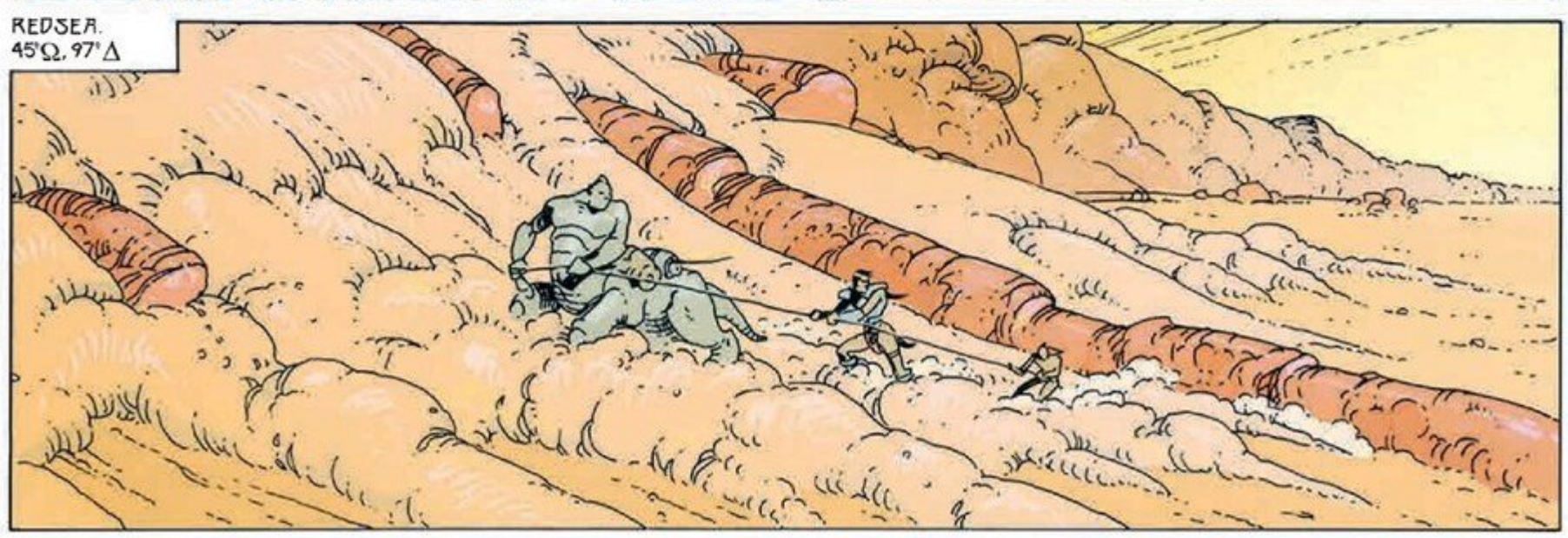
"YOU'RE PERFECT, RADON!"

29

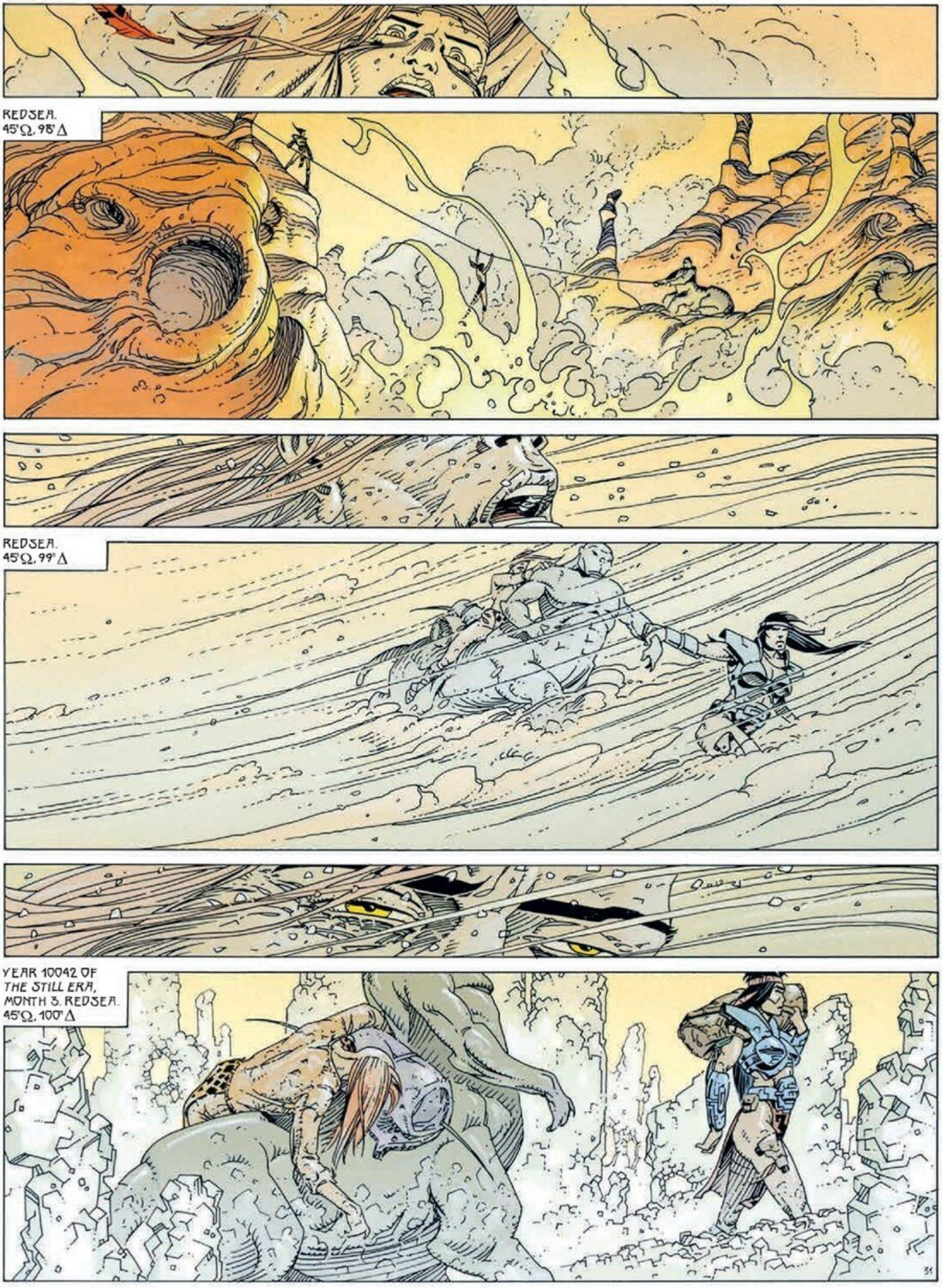

REDSEA.
43°Ω, 95°Δ




REDSEA.
45°Ω, 96°Δ


REDSEA.
45°Ω, 97°Δ

30


REDSEA.
45°Ω, 98°Δ
REDSEA.
45°Ω, 99°Δ
YEAR 10042 OF
THE STILL ERA,
MONTH 3. REDSEA.
45°Ω, 100°Δ

"WHAT IS ALL THIS?"

"SALT, ARKADI… NOTHING BUT SALT…"

UP-THERE-TOP-OF-"ISLAND"-CLEAR-VIEW…

THE GULF OF ADEN!

PRETTY- HMM!

UH- HUH...

WE'RE LEAVING REDSEA...

WE'LL HAVE TO GO AROUND THAT HILL: THE HORN OF SMALI. IT'LL BE EVEN HOTTER THERE, BUT SHELTERED FROM THE WINDS.

THEN WE'LL FOLLOW THE COAST OF SUDAF TOWARDS TWILIGHT...

HMM...

YOUR FACE BETRAYS YOUR THOUGHTS, KID...

WHEN I WAS "DEAD" ON THE RED HORN, THE SLEEPING GOD TOLD ME I WOULD FIND A GUIDE: OR-PHE.

WHICH IS WHY I FOLLOWED YOU. BUT ALL I'VE SEEN OF THE WORLD ARE DESERTS, MONSTERS, BLOODTHIRSTY NOMADS, AND MAD GOLEMS...

AND NOW *THIS!* NOTHING BUT ENDLESS SALT... AS WHITE AS DEATH... WITH THOUSANDS MORE KMETS STILL TO GO...

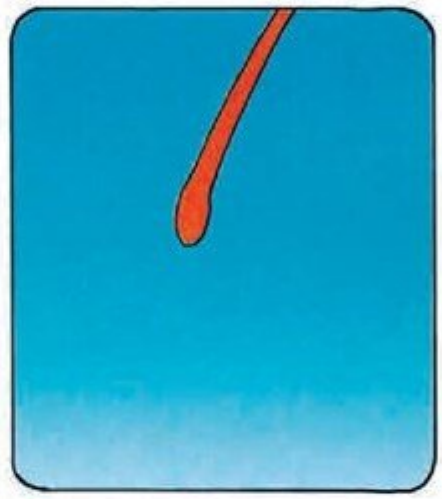
HOW MANY MORE CYCLES MUST WE WALK IN THE VOID OF THE WORLD. BEYOND IN PURSUIT OF A GHOST, A LEGEND...

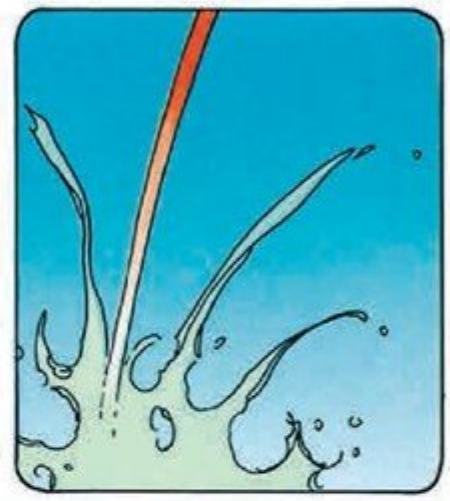
_A DREAM?

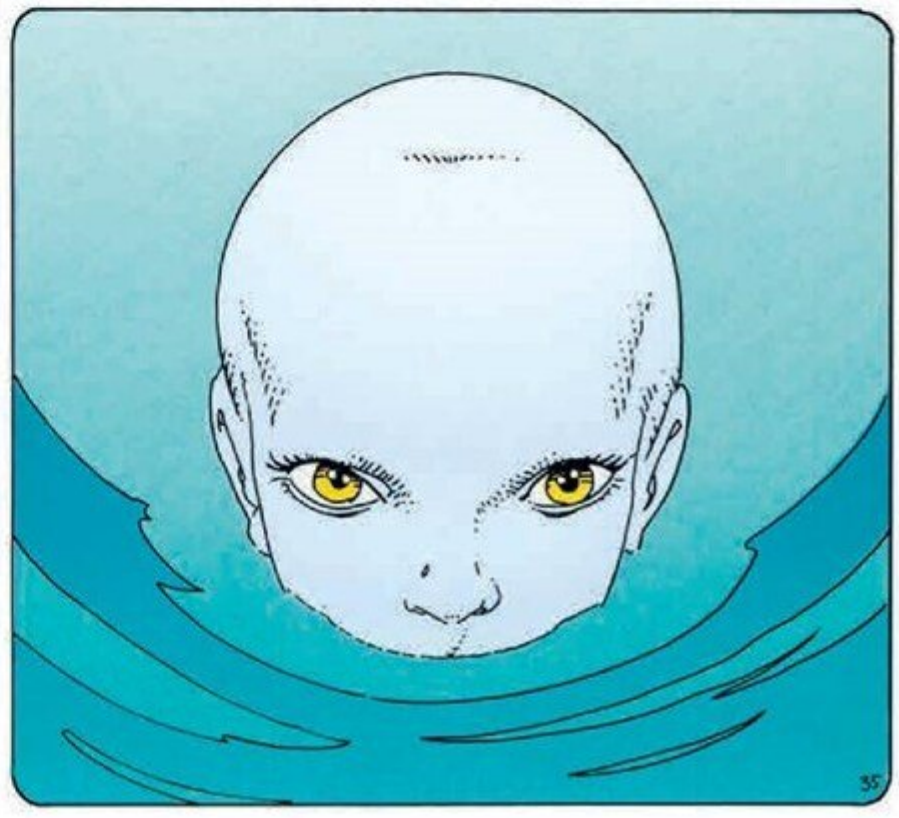
HERE. PUT THESE OVER YOUR EYES.

AND NOW, JUST LET GO. THIS IS MY FAVORITE DREAM.

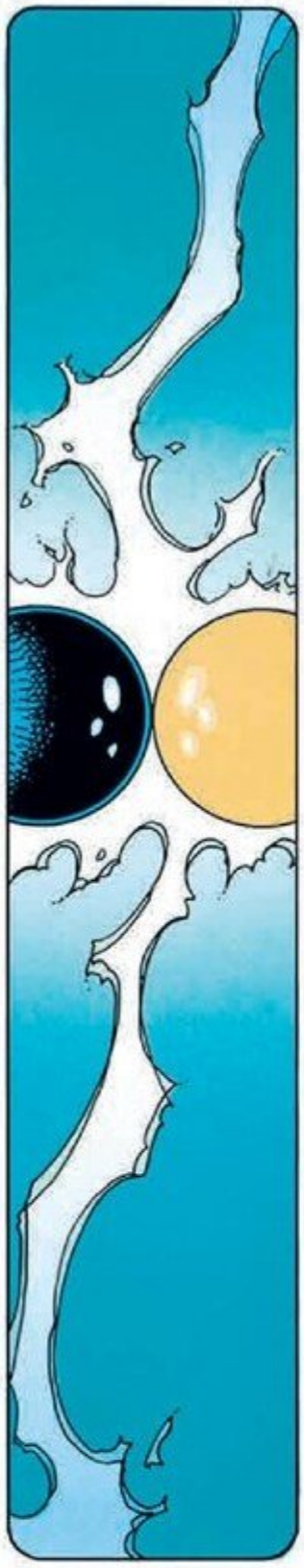
"ONE OF OR-PHE'S..."

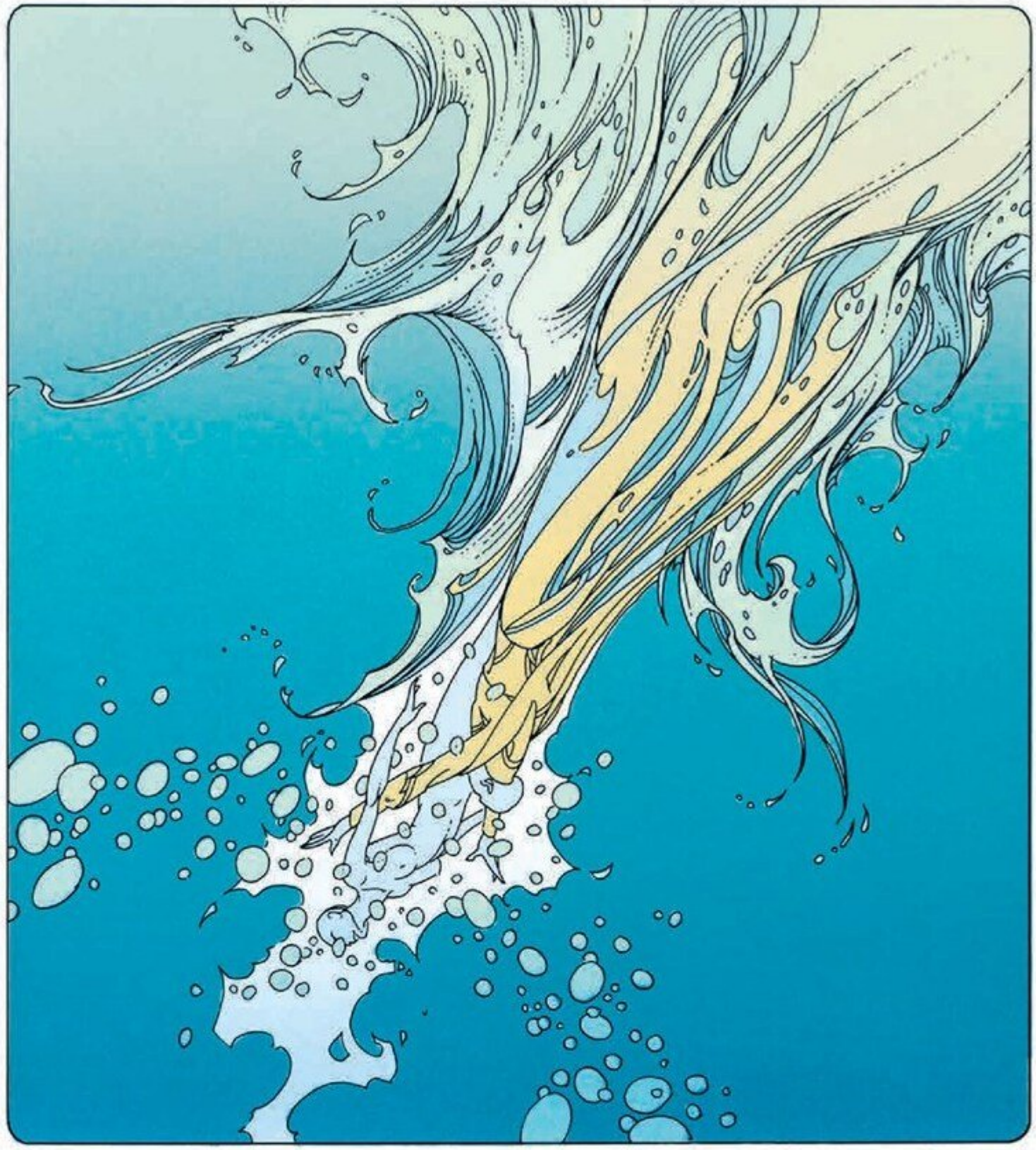


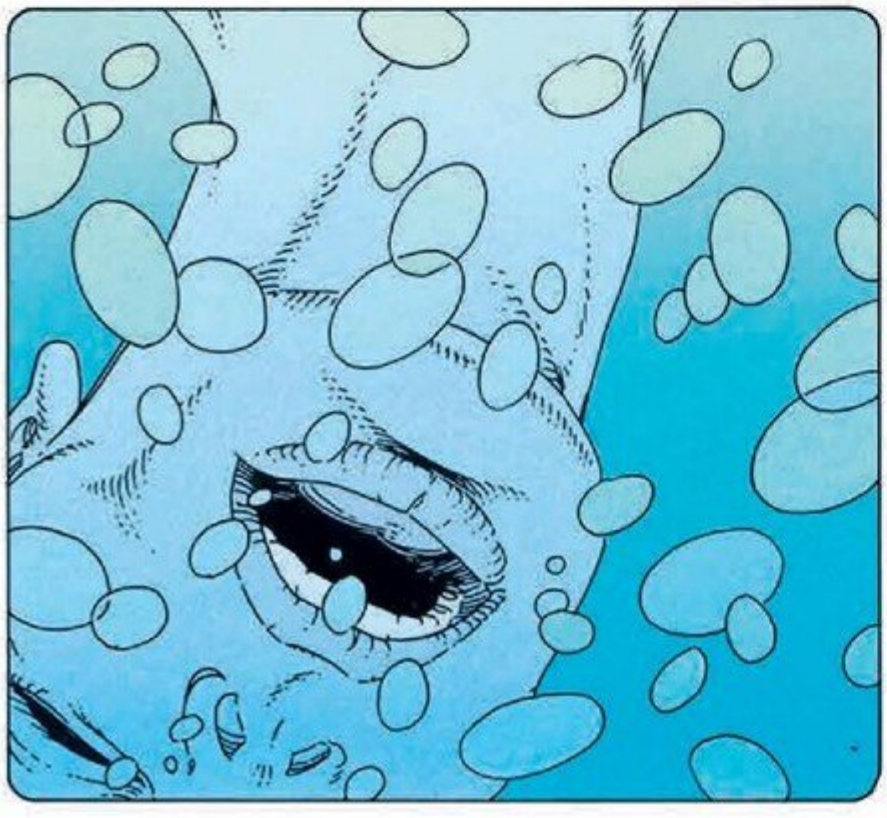




HNN?







37

I...

I SAW ANOTHER WORLD_ AN *IMPOSSIBLE* WORLD_ WITH GRASS, *GREEN* TREES, A *BLUE* SKY, AND...

PAN-DRA! I SAW THE SEA!

WHAT THE...

PAN-DRA! WHERE ARE WE?

PAN-DRA!

I'M HERE, ARK...

AND...

"I DON'T KNOW WHERE WE ARE!"

SO IT'S TRUE, THEN! WHAT I SAW IN MY "DREAM" REALLY DOES EXIST!

GROUND-SWALLOWED-US! HNN!

THERE'S NO WIND... AND IT'S BALMY... WHAT IS THIS PLACE?

NO IDEA... BUT I LIKE IT.

A CAVE UNDERNEATH THE "ISLAND," MAYBE...

HEY!

WHAT THE...?

HNN! MOUTHS?!

THEY...

CHOMP!

CHOMP!

...THEY EAT?!

YEP! SHE'S GRAZING! HEE HEE!

HMM?
HUH?
WHO SPEAKS?
DON'T STAY THERE WHILE SHE'S GRAZING!
BECAUSE SHE'S ALSO A CARNIVORE!
KAI!
THIS WAY! UP HERE!
COME IN, COME IN, MONSTERS OF THE GREAT EXTERIOR!
40
WHO ARE YOU? WHERE ARE WE? AND WHO IS SHE?
WHO ARE WE? WHERE DID WE COME FROM? WHERE ARE WE GOING? STRAIGHT FOR THE BIG QUESTIONS!

EXPLAIN THIS, LITTLE BLOB!

"LITTLE BLOB?" IT WANTS ANSWERS YET IT INSULTS ME!

WHO DOES THIS BARBARIAN THINK IT IS?!

WILL YOU SPEAK?!

OOOOW! THAT HURTS!

ALL RIGHT, FINE. AFTER ALL, WE HAVE TIME TO CHAT.

IN FACT, IT'S ALL WE HAVE TIME FOR, WHILE SHE GRAZES...

OKAY, SO...

SHE IS MY MOTHER, AND MY GODDESS, MY HOLY HOME AND MY SACRED GARDEN... THE GARDEN OF DELIGHT...

HERE, NECTAR AND AMBROSIA FLOW FROM THE BLESSED FOUNTAINS...

HER NAME IS *NOONE!* THE GREAT WHALE!

WHALE?!

"SUCH A VIOLENT STORM AROSE UPON THE SEA THAT THE SHIP THREATENED TO BREAK UP. NOW THE LORD APPOINTED A GREAT FISH TO SWALLOW JONAH."

HE'S MAD.

41

HERE'S THE THING, FATSO...

I HAVE A MAJOR FLAW...

BAF!

I LACK PATIENCE.

OH!

WAAAAAH!

NO NEED TO HIT ME!

I'LL TELL YOU EVERY-THING.

OKAY, SO... WE'RE IN A "CAVE," YESS... UNDERNEATH THE "ISLAND," YESS...

EXCEPT THAT, WELL... THE "ISLAND..." THE ISLAND WALKS!

THE "ISLAND" IS A HUMONGOUS BEAST...

IT'S NOONE!

THERE YOU HAVE IT!

NOONE?

AN "ISLAND"...

THAT WALKS?!

YESS! SHE WALKS! HEE! HEE! CAN'T YOU FEEL IT?

AFTER SHE SWALLOWED YOU, ALONG WITH A FEW QUINTALS OF SALT AND SAND, SHE RESUMED HER WALKING... THERE YOU HAVE IT!

I'VE ALREADY JOURNEYED THOUSANDS OF KMETS SINCE SHE SWALLOWED ME...

JONAH SWALLOWED UP... LIKE YOU... GULP! HEE, HEE!

I WAS GETTING BORED...

IT'S BEEN SO LONG...

SO LONG...

42

SO...

...SO...

...LONG.

HE'S BABBLING...

BUT HE'S RIGHT... I CAN FEEL THE GROUND SHAKING.

HIS NOONE IS WALKING INDEED.

AH! WE CAN GO OUT NOW. SHE'S FINISHED HER BREAKFAST! BREAKFAST ON THE GRASS, *HEE! HEE!*

NOW IT'S TIME FOR *MY* BREAKFAST! HEE HEE! MY TREAT!

!

FRESH WATERCRESS, MEAT STEW WITH MUSHROOM SAUCE, STEAMED POTATOES, SEASONAL FRUIT, LOTS OF FRESH WATER...

AND WINE, EVEN!

DO YOU UNDERSTAND? *NOONE* ROAMS THE DEATH-DEPTHS, SWALLOWING THE GROUND AS SHE GOES... AND WITH IT, LOTS OF OTHER STUFF...SEEDS, SPORES, ANIMALS, PEOPLE, *HEE! HEE...!*

ME! YOU!

HERE, IN HER BIG BELLY, WHERE IT'S SHELTERED AND WARM, THINGS GROW! *SHE* CAN GRAZE AT HER LEISURE! SHE CARRIES HER OWN VEGETABLE GARDEN INSIDE HER! AND MINE TOO, *HEE! HEE!*

THE FRUITS, THE ANIMALS, THE MUSHROOMS-- EVERYTHING HERE IS EDIBLE! EVERY NEED IS MET...

THANK YOU, *O NOONE!* EARTHLY PARADISE, GARDEN OF EDEN, NOURISHING MATRIX OF THE BLISSFUL JONAH!

43

A WALKING PARADISE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE GULF OF ADEN... SURE.

ARE WE GOING TO STAY INSIDE HERE?

AS NICE AS THAT WOULD BE, NOONE IS NOT HEADING IN OUR DIRECTION...

UNLESS...

HEY, JONAH, OR WHATEVER YOUR NAME IS! SHOW ME HOW TO DRIVE THIS ANIMAL!

!

...D-DRIVE NOONE? BUT-BUT-BUT...

SHOW ME! AND QUIT PLAYING DUMB!

H-HOW DID YOU KNOW?

MY KEEN SENSE OF OBSER-VATION.

LET'S GO!

44

HERE... THIS IS THE BRAIN.

BUT IT'S OUT OF JUICE.

OH YEAH? THEN WHAT DO YOU COOK WITH?

EITHER WAY, I'VE GOT JUICE.

COMPATIBLE TECH, I KNEW IT.

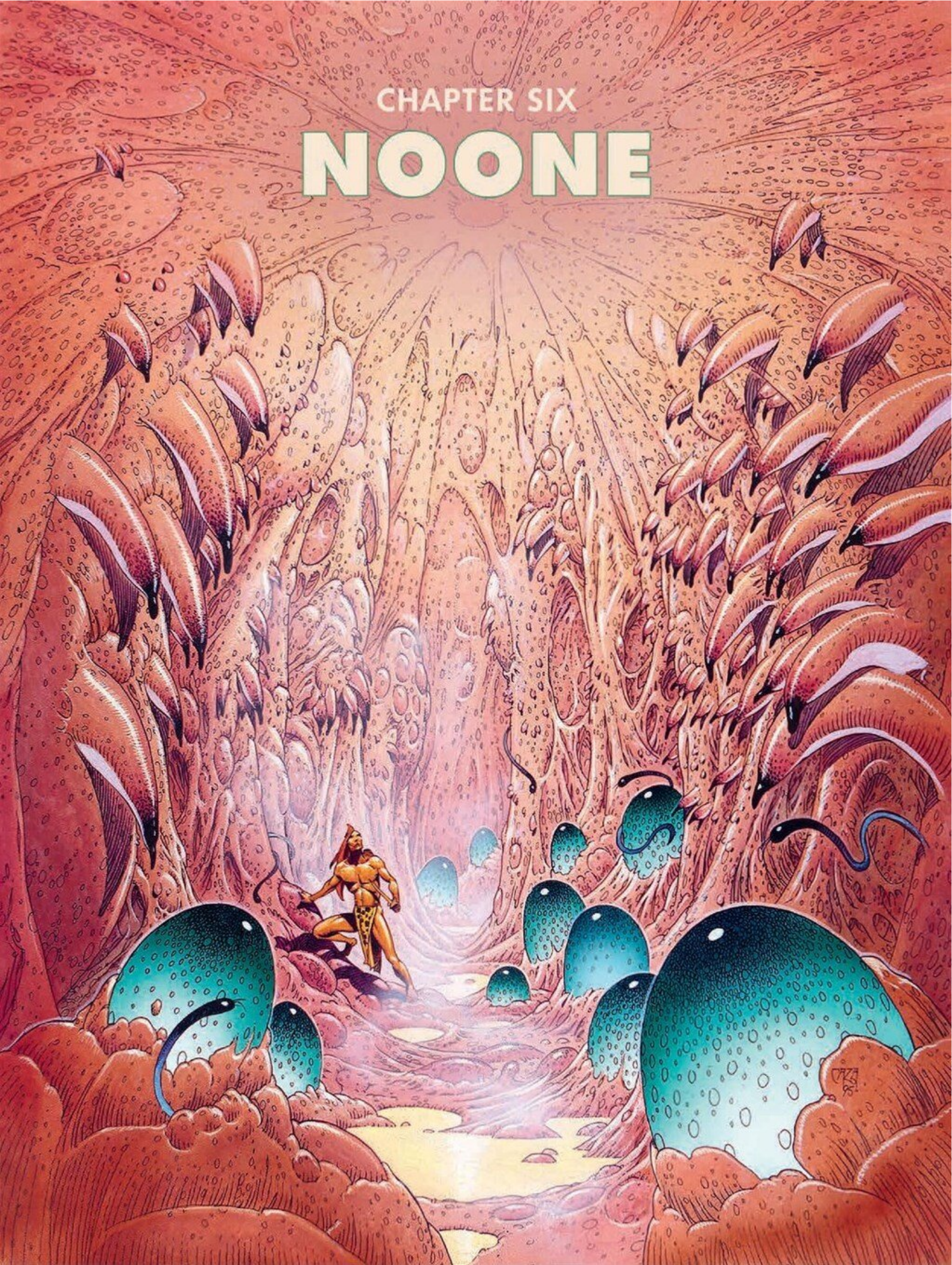
CLAC!

WITH THIS...

...AND ORPHE'S COORDINATES...

<INPUT>

"NOONE WILL NOW DO THE WALKING *FOR US.*"


CHAPTER SIX
NOONE

YOU SEE THAT HAIRLESS SKIN AND THOSE SICKLY PALE EYES? THOSE FOUR FINGERS? THIS SO-CALLED JONAH IS A *CHOSEN ONE*. AN URBANITE.

HNN. ME-TOO-HAVE-FOUR-FINGERS...AND-AM-NOT-*CHOSEN!*

SO *THAT'S* A CHOSEN ONE?

YEP. EXCEPT THEY'RE USUALLY TALLER AND CRAZIER.

PLUS, THIS GUY HAS *TRODES*-- NEURAL IMPLANTS--THERE...AND THERE... AT SOME POINT IN HIS LIFE HE WAS DIRECTLY PLUGGED INTO HEL.

BUT I THOUGHT... YOU TOLD ME *THE CHOSEN* COULDN'T LEAVE DIS. AGORA... UM...

AGORA-PHOBIA. YEAH. THAT'S WHAT I THOUGHT.

BUT THERE'S HIS COOKING GEAR...AND THE BIO-CYBER INTERFACE THAT PILOTS HIS NOONE...

THIS WHOLE GETUP CAN ONLY COME FROM DIS. I'D LOVE TO KNOW HOW HE ENDED UP HERE...

CHO-ZIN?

DI... DISS?

DIS, YES! HEL! DOES HER NAME RING A BELL?

"HER"... YESS! NOONE!

IT'S AWFUL WHEN SHE FERTILIZES...

BUT YOU GET USED TO IT!

DO AS YOU WISH, BUT ME, I'M HEADING FOR COVER.

WHEN SHE "FERTILIZES"? IS THAT DANGEROUS?

SPLAF!

NO. IT'S JUST DIRTY!

PLOF!

Hi! Hi!

WHAT THE...

PLAF!

THIS IS... DUNG!

AND-THE-GOOD-KIND-TOO-HMN-HMN!!

SPLATCH!

HA! HA! HA!

HEE HEE! SUCH IS THE CYCLE OF LIFE IN THE GREAT COSMIC DANCE OF NOONE, THE GIANT GROUND-EATING WHALE...

THE SACRED DUNG NOURISHES THE SACRED FODDER... THE SACRED FODDER NOURISHES NOONE... NOONE PRODUCES HER SACRED DUNG... AD LIBITUM... AD LIBITUM...

OH, AND SHE ALSO WATERS HER PASTURE...

BUT FEAR NOT... IT'S ONLY WATER!

USE IT TO WASH UP, MY FRIENDS. YOU ALL REEK!

HON!

HON!

HON!

YOU'RE NOT GOING TO TAKE A DIP, PAN-DRA?

3

HMM_

YEAH_

PAF!

NO-NO?

BOOHOO! WOMAN BIG MEANIE!

ME NO SUCK?

DON'T YOU EVER TRY FONDLING ME AGAIN, YOU LITTLE BRAT!

PAN-DRA! YOU... YOU DON'T HAVE...

A NAVEL? NOPE!

MY DESIGNERS DIDN'T BOTHER WITH THAT LITTLE DETAIL.

YOUR DESIGNERS ?!?

WHAT DID YOU THINK, ARKADI? I DON'T COME FROM A MOTHER'S WOMB. I'VE NEVER BEEN A BABY OR A CHILD. I WAS ASSEMBLED IN AN ACCELERATED CLONING TUB...

I'M AN ANDROID, ARKADI. A SYNTHETIC CREATURE.

LIKE A GOLEM, AS YOU WOULD SAY. BUT OF FLESH AND BLOOD.

YEAR 10042 OF THE STILL ERA, MONTH 4.

DAY 31 INSIDE NOONE.

THE STILL ERA BEGAN WHEN EARTH STOPPED ROTATING ON HER AXIS.

WHICH MEANS THAT BEFORE, MORE THAN 10,000 YEARS AGO, SHE DID ROTATE.

THESE ROTATIONS MEANT THAT LIGHT AND DARKNESS ALTERNATED EVERYWHERE.

DAY AND NIGHT WERE STILL INDICATORS OF TIME, THEN, AND NOT JUST GEO...GEOGRAPHICAL TERMS.

IF IT WAS "DAY," AND YOU LONGED FOR THE COOLNESS OF THE DARK, YOU ONLY HAD TO WAIT FOR "NIGHT" TO COME... AND VICE VERSA. IT WAS A WORLD OF HOPE.

IN THE STILL ERA, TO REACH NIGHT, YOU HAVE TO WALK. IT IS A WORLD OF RESOLVE.

FOR NOW, NOONE IS WALKING FOR US.

TOWARDS NIGHT.

<QUESTION> DEFINE: NOONE <ENTER>

<ANSWER: INCORRECT ENTRY. REDEFINE SEARCH FIELD>

PAN-DRA EVENTUALLY LOANED ME HER BOX, HER "DATABASE," AS SHE CALLS IT.

I'M ONLY JUST LEARNING TO READ AND WRITE, BUT THERE'S A VOICE-ACTIVATED PROGRAM THAT GIVES ME ACCESS TO A WEALTH OF INFORMATION.

<RESET>

<QUESTIONS>
ZO_ZO-OLOGY

THE BOX KNOWS ALL, APPARENTLY, IF YOU KNOW HOW TO ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS.

<ONE>
DEFINE: NOONE
<TWO>
DEFINE: WHALE
<ENTER>

<ANSWERS: ONE: NOONE: NON-LISTED WORD. SEE: NOON, NON, NO, ENCYCLOPEDIA OF DEAD LANGUAGES, AVAILABLE IN CENTRAL UNIT HEL.

TWO: WHALE: ANCIENT GIANT MARINE MAMMAL EXTINCT.>

SEE: NOON, NOI
ENCYCLOPEDIA
LANGUAGES, AV
CENT
TWO:
WHALE: ANCIENT
EXTINCT SPECIES
<.../...>

DEAD LANGUAGES... EXTINCT SPECIES...

FOOD'S READY!

ACCORDING TO YOUR BOX, NOONE SHOULDN'T EVEN EXIST. NO MORE THAN A "WHALE," WHICH IS LISTED AS AN "EXTINCT SPECIES."

JUST LIKE A LOT OF THE ANIMALS AND PLANTS THAT LIVE IN HERE, ACTUALLY...

HMM... YOU'RE A BIT OF AN EXTINCT SPECIES YOURSELF.

?

YOU'RE CURIOUS!

GIVE ME THAT!

I NEED TO CHECK OUR COURSE.

HOW CAN NOONE HAVE SO MUCH FRESH WATER HERE IN THE DEATH-DEPTHS, WHICH ARE STEEPED IN SALT?

SHE HAS HER OWN INTERNAL DISTILLERY! FIRST, SHE PUMPS THE SALT FROM THE LAGOONS. THEN SHE HEATS IT. THE CONDENSED STEAM IS FRESH WATER...

THEN SHE EVACUATES HER SALINE FECES INTO *THE GREAT EXTERIOR*... WHERE THERE IS WEEPING AND GNASHING OF TEETH...

HEE HEE!

SINCE SHE EVACUATES, THERE MUST BE A WAY OUT...

YOU WANT TO *LEAVE*? WHY?! DON'T WE HAVE EVERYTHING WE NEED HERE?

YEAH... SURE.

CURRENT COORDINATES: 48°Ω 112°Δ AVERAGE SPEED: 01 KNOT REMAINING DISTANCE: ±10,700 KMETS.

ASSUMING OR-PHE WON'T HAVE CHANGED LOCATIONS...

EVERY-THING ALL RIGHT?

WE'VE PASSED THE HARDEST PART OF THE JOURNEY. WE JUST VEERED 110° STARBOARD. WE'LL STAY ON THIS ALPHA-DELTA COURSE UNTIL WE REACH *TWILIGHT*.

IT'S EASY TO PILOT THIS THING. I'LL SHOW YOU, IF YOU WANT...

THAT'S NOT A BAD IDEA, ACTUALLY. FROM NOW ON, *YOU* DRIVE. I'VE BEEN THE CAPTAIN LONG ENOUGH. I'M TAKING A BREAK.

YOU CAN HAVE THE BOX BACK.

HOW MUCH LONGER ARE WE GOING TO STAY INSIDE HERE?

NOONE'S NOT VERY FAST. I'M AFRAID DIS WILL HAVE TO LIVE WITHOUT OR-PHE FOR A FEW MORE MONTHS.

THEN AGAIN, WE HAVE EVERYTHING WE NEED HERE, NO?

YEAH...

I NOTICE THAT PAN-DRA NEVER PUT HER ARMOR BACK ON EVER SINCE SHE FIRST REMOVED IT...

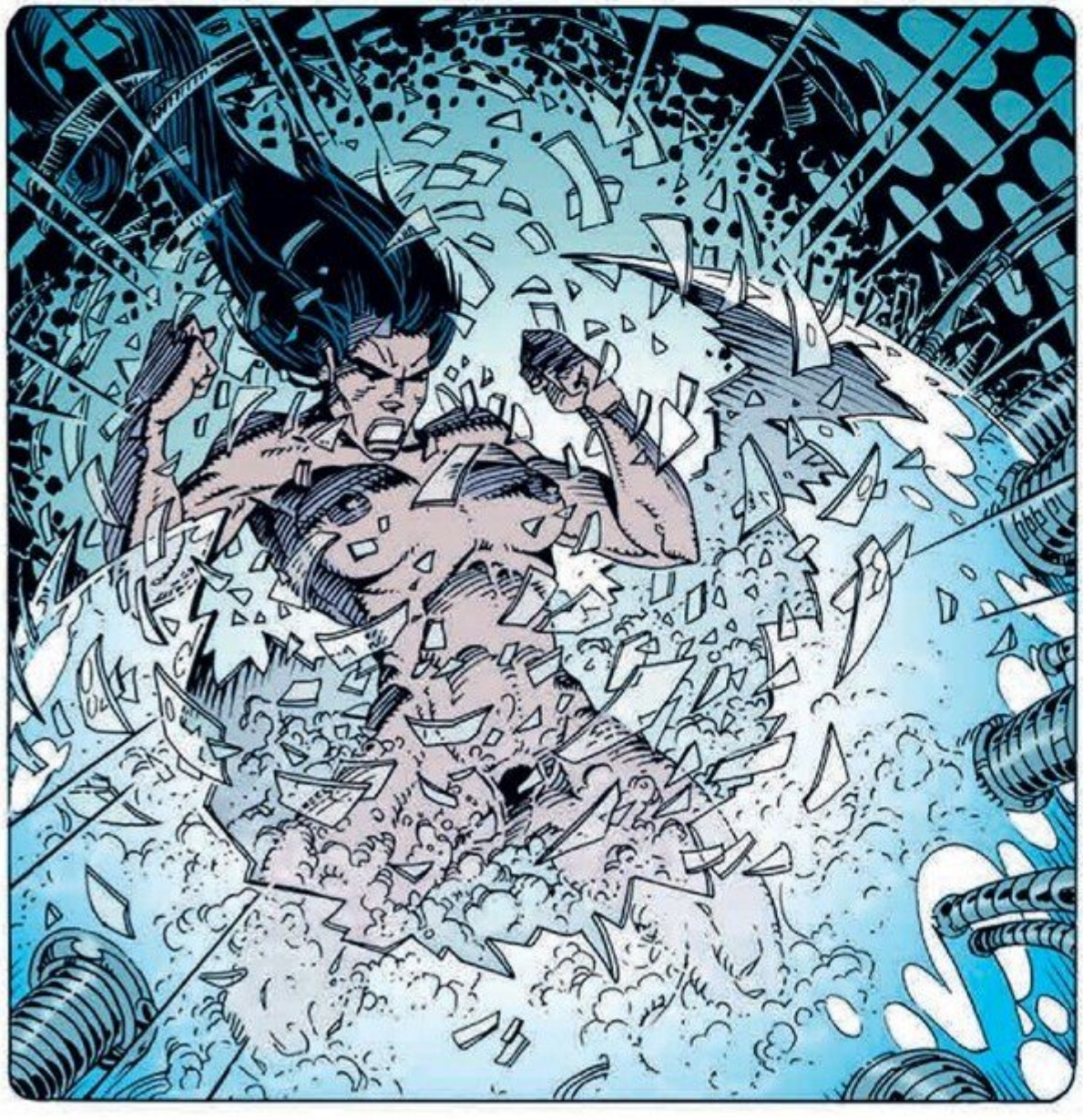
PAN-DRA...

"AND SO, YES, IT'S TRUE. HEL DECIDED TO CREATE AN ORGANIC ANDROID USING THAT BARBARIAN'S GENETIC CODE. A BEING MEANT TO BE STRONG. IMMUNE TO AGORAPHOBIA, ABLE TO WITHSTAND THE HARSHEST CONDITIONS OF THE GREAT EXTERIOR, AND INDEPENDENT OF ANY AND ALL SOURCES OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE.

"THE BIO-DOCS GREW MY ORGANS ONE AT A TIME, VIA CLONING, IN TUBS OF AMNIOTIC FLUID. THEY MADE A FEW IMPROVEMENTS TO THEM, TOO, BUT THAT'S ABOUT ALL I CAN TELL YOU: GENETIC MANIPULATION IS THEIR SPECIALTY, NOT MINE."

THEY PATIENTLY ASSEMBLED THE WHOLE THING AROUND A SKELETON MADE OF INDESTRUCTIBLE TITANIUM FORGED BY HE-FAS-TUS, THE MASTER OF METALS...

...WHO ALSO ENDOWED ME WITH A FEW INTERNAL BIONIC GADGETS, AS WELL AS MY ARMOR AND MY WEAPONS.



AND THUS, BURSTING FROM THE SHELL OF HER MATRIX BY HER OWN WILL, WAS BORN *PAN-DRA THE GREAT*--EQUIPPED WITH ALL THE FEATURES EXCEPT FOR A NAVEL! PAN-DRA, A NEW TITAN IN THE SERVICE OF HEL AND DIS, A "TITANA" MADE OF METAL AND FLESH, MORE POWERFUL, MORE RESISTANT, AND FASTER--OH, SO MUCH FASTER!--THAN HER HUMAN MODEL!

THIS "MODEL" YOU TALK ABOUT... THE BARBARIAN. DID HE HAVE AN AMBER STONE ON HIS FOREHEAD?

NO IDEA. I CAME OUT OF MY TUB A GOOD FIVE YEARS AFTER HEL HARVESTED A FEW OF HIS CELLS.

WELL, I DO KNOW. THAT MAN CAN ONLY BE...ARKAS...

MY FATHER!

?!?

YOUR FA...

!!

AH! HA! HA!

HA! HA!

LOOK, THERE PROBABLY WEREN'T MANY BARBARIANS THAT MADE IT TO DIS THAT YEAR, TRUE.

BUT TO ASSUME THAT...

...THAT...

12

NO, ARKADI, NOT THAT! I...

NO!

TCHAC!

13

BROOOOOOOMM...

?!

WHAT THE...?

JONAH?

DAY OF ANGER! DAY OF ANGER!

"...AND, LO, THERE WAS A GREAT EARTHQUAKE; AND EVERY MOUNTAIN AND ISLAND WERE MOVED OUT OF THEIR PLACES."

14

ANGER?! HA! HA!

MOUNTAINS THAT WALK EVENTUALLY BUMP INTO EACH OTHER, YOU KNOW!

TA-TA-TAM!

HOOOOONN!...

HA!
AAH!
HA!
HNN!
HNN!
HNN!

WOOOOOOOH...

Hi Hi Hi

SAAAY ...YOU DON'T LOOK SO GOOD, KID.

METHINKS YOU NEED A LITTLE PICK-ME-UP!

QUICK, WHILE THE BIG GIRL'S NOT AROUND.

IS THIS... SOMA?!

HEE HEE! I'VE GOT MY OWN DISTILLERY, TOO... BUT IT'S A SECRET, HEE! HEE!

THE NECTAR OF THE GODS! THE BOTTLE DIVINE!

DRINK UP!

NOOOO...

?

AR-KADi?!

HNG!

NOOOOO...

i DON'T WANNAAAA!

WHAT DID YOU GIVE HIM?

HE'S FREAKING OUT... CLAUSTROPHOBIA, MAYBE...

ME? NOTHIIING!

NO!

HE'S HURTING NOONE!

STOP IT!

LET GO OF MY SWORD, YOU GERIATRIC BABY!

ALCOHOL?!

WAAAAA! HE HURT ME!

LEAVE HIM ALONE, JO! HE'S FALLING ASLEEP NOW.

YOU GO SLEEP IT OFF, TOO!

MEANIE! MEANIE!

18

"OH HEAVENLY "HIC" FATHER, WHO TURNED WATER INTO "HIC" WINE, PLEASE MAKE MY ASS A "HIC" LANTERN, TO SHINE "HIC" UPON MY NEIGHBOR!"

NOT BAD... BETTER THAN HIS WINE, AT ANY RATE. THAT RASCAL'S BEEN HIDING THE GOOD STUFF!

HERE!

WHY-FRIEND-ARKADI-SO-SAD? DON'T-WE-HAVE-ALL-WE-NEED-HERE?

YES, WE DO, RAY-RAY!

ALL RIGHT... I'M OFF TO TAKE A NAP.

HNN-ME-WATCH-OVER-ARKADI.

HIS NAME IS LEGION.

NOOO...

!

GIVE UP, ARK-DI...

HNN?!

TCHAC!

AAH!

!!

SOMA-NOT-GOOD-FOR-RADON-HNN!

FOR ME NEITHER, RADON... FOR ME NEITHER.

HIC

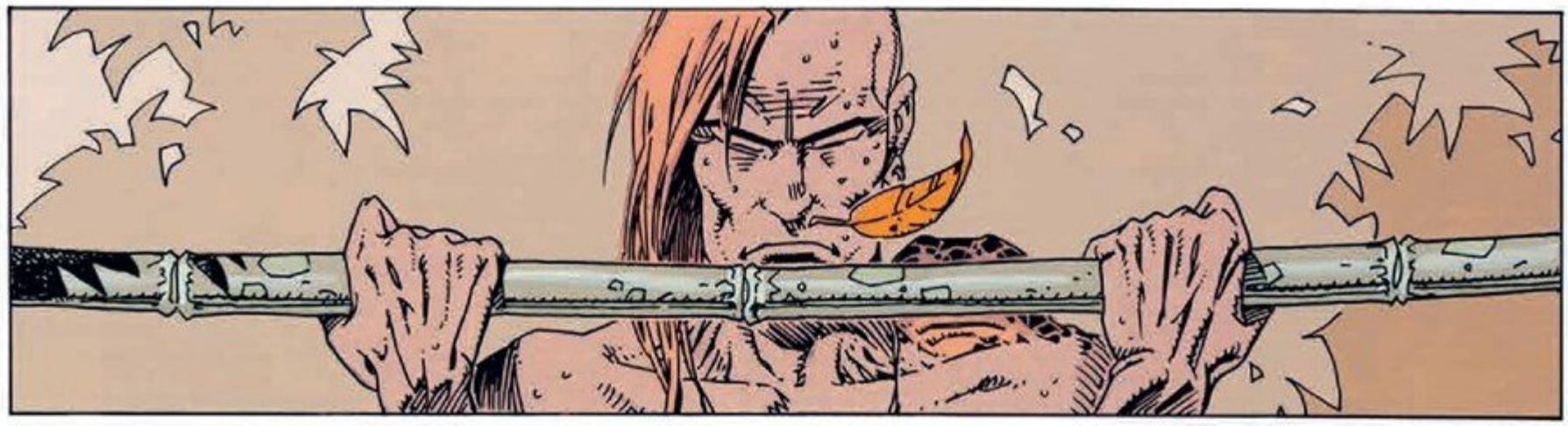
<ENTER>

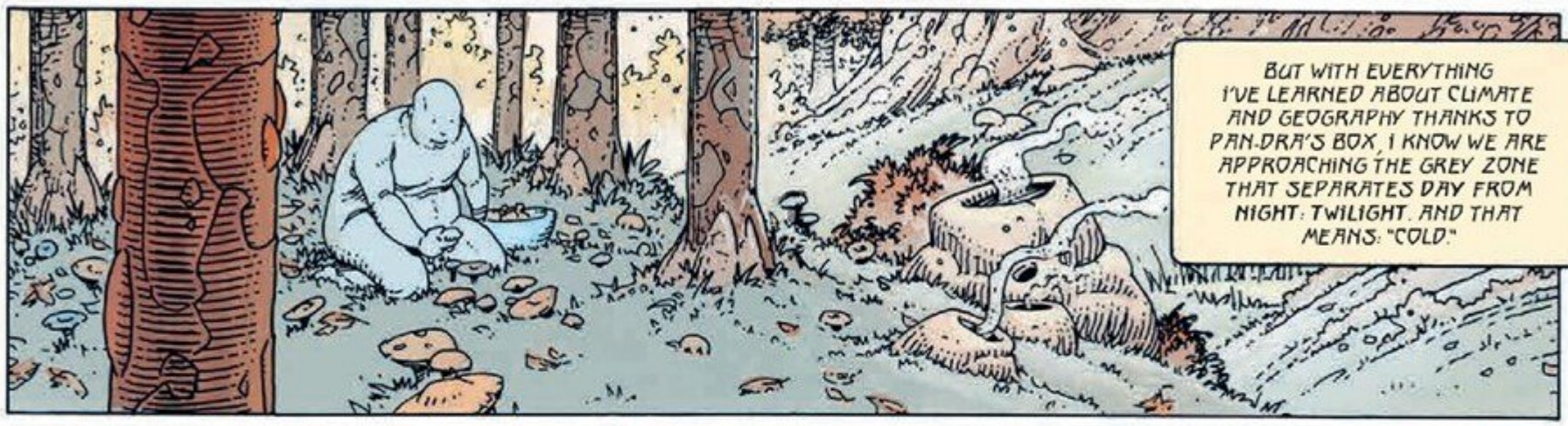
<ARKADI FILE>

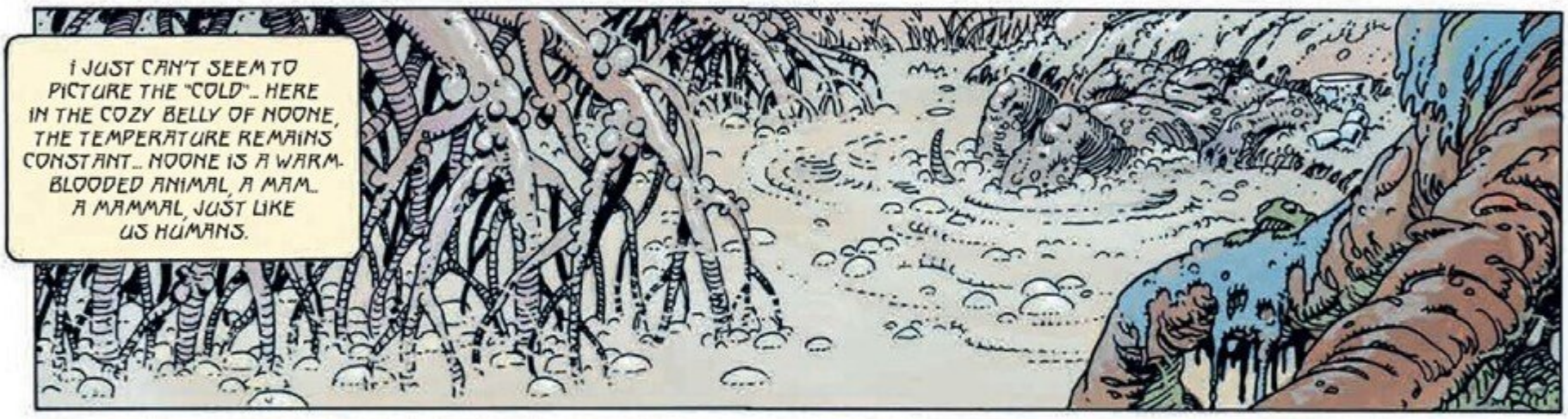
TRAVEL JOURNAL CREATED IN ORDER TO... WHAT? NOT TALK TO MYSELF, PERHAPS...

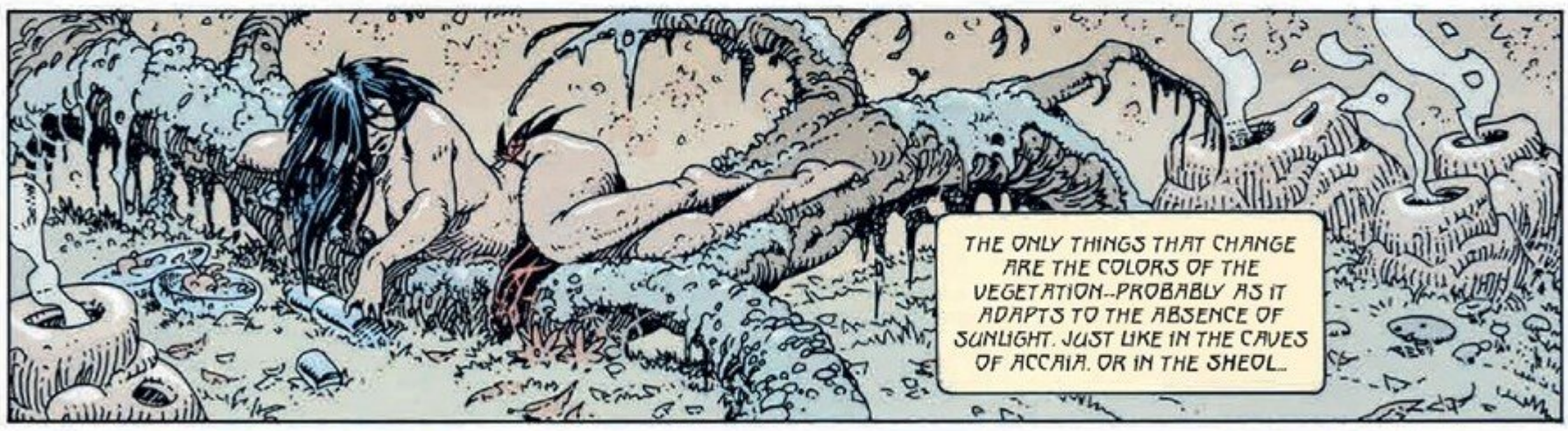
THE STILL ERA, YEAR 10042, MONTH 10. DAY 196 INSIDE NOON... 7 MONTHS WITHOUT SEEING THE SKY OR FEELING THE WIND.

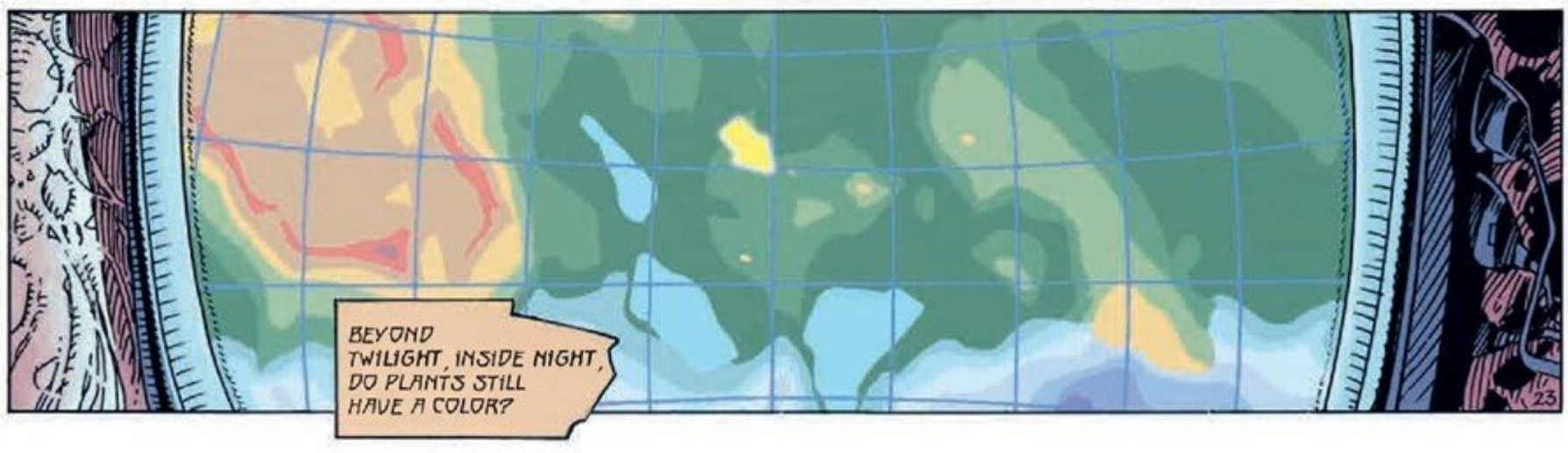
THE ONLY INFO I HAVE ON THE EXTERIOR ARE THE MAPS FROM THE MAGIC MIR--NO!--FROM THE SCREEN IN THE COCKPIT.




BUT WITH EVERYTHING I'VE LEARNED ABOUT CLIMATE AND GEOGRAPHY THANKS TO PAN-DRA'S BOX, I KNOW WE ARE APPROACHING THE GREY ZONE THAT SEPARATES DAY FROM NIGHT: TWILIGHT. AND THAT MEANS: "COLD."


I JUST CAN'T SEEM TO PICTURE THE "COLD"... HERE IN THE COZY BELLY OF NOONE, THE TEMPERATURE REMAINS CONSTANT... NOONE IS A WARM-BLOODED ANIMAL, A MAM... A MAMMAL, JUST LIKE US HUMANS.


THE ONLY THINGS THAT CHANGE ARE THE COLORS OF THE VEGETATION--PROBABLY AS IT ADAPTS TO THE ABSENCE OF SUNLIGHT. JUST LIKE IN THE CAVES OF ACCAIA. OR IN THE SHEOL...


BEYOND TWILIGHT, INSIDE NIGHT, DO PLANTS STILL HAVE A COLOR?
23

WE ARE ENTERING THE CREPUSCULAR, YES... AND TWILIGHT IS ALREADY HERE INSIDE... A WARM DARKNESS, AND SILENCE...

NOONE LULLS US INTO A STATE OF NEAR STUPOR WITHIN HER.

COORDINATES: 10° Ω, 150° Δ ALTITUDE: 2100 METS. CROZE THRESHOLD.

<QUESTION>
BIOLOGY.
DEFINE: MUTATION
<ENTER>

<SUDDEN VARIATION OF A HEREDITARY FEATURE IN A SPECIES OR A LINEAGE VIA A CHANGE IN THE NUMBER OR NATURE OF THE GENES. (SEE: HEREDITY, GENETICS, CHROMOSOMES, DNA, THEORY OF EVOLUTION.)

PROVOKED MUTATION: SEE: IRRADIATION, GENETIC MANIPULATION.

(EXCERPT FROM THE UNIVERSAL ENCYCLOPEDIA. URB- HEL. SECTION: HUMAN SCIENCE SUB-SECTION:

IF I UNDERSTAND CORRECTLY, WHALES, AN EXTINCT SPECIES, ADAPTED TO THE OCEANS DRYING OUT OVER THOUSANDS OF YEARS TO BECOME "GEOPHAGIC," OR SOIL-EATERS--IN OTHER WORDS, NOONE.

AND NOONE KEEPS GRAZING...

MEANWHILE, IT LOOKS LIKE THE RADON'S MUTANT PHYSIOLOGY ENABLES HIM TO TAKE ON, IN REAL TIME, THE FORM MOST ADAPTABLE TO THE CONDITIONS OF TIME AND PLACE... BUT AT WHAT COST DOES THIS ADAPTABILITY COME?

HE HAS REGRESSED BACK TO WHAT HE WAS IN THE SHEOL... WORSE, EVEN. REVERSE EVOLUTION.

CAN HE EVEN SPEAK ANYMORE?

AND NOONE KEEPS FERTILIZING...

PLOF!

PLOF!

EVEN PAN-DRA... SHE WAS MADE-- "DESIGNED!"--FOR EVERYTHING BUT INACTIVITY. HERE, SHE SEEMS A...ANESTHETIZED... NUMBED BY SOMA, FOOD, IDLENESS...

IT'S AS THOUGH, SINCE SHE HAS NOTHING TO DO, OR SEARCH FOR, OR HUNT, OR FIGHT, SHE'S IN SLOW-MOTION, IN A STATE OF "HALF-LIFE" LIKE SOME AVERAGE CHOSEN ONE IN "DREAM" WITHDRAWAL

AND NOONE KEEPS WATERING...

AS FOR ME, I DO WHAT I CAN TO FIGHT GENERAL LETHARGY: I EXERCISE, I DO WEAPONS TRAINING, I HUNT, I STUDY... I KEEP THIS "JOURNAL." BUT NOW I HAVE NOBODY TO TALK TO OR ASK MY INCESSANT QUESTIONS TO...

<DESCRIPTION
CRYPTOGAM FROM THE ORDER
LACTARIUS DELICIOSUS (L. EX. FR)
COMMONLY KNOWN AS THE DELICIOUS MILK CAP, RED PINE MUSHROOM OR PINE MUSHROOM
EDIBLE
(EXTINCT SPECIES)

...OTHER THAN PAN-DRA'S BOX...

ARE YOU IN HERE?

...AND OLD JONAH, OF COURSE.

HERE, KID! I MADE YOU A MUSHROOM OMELET.

IT FEELS LIKE NOONE IS SLOWING DOWN...

IT'S BECAUSE OF THE ROUTE YOU'RE MAKING HER TAKE! THERE'S THE DEEP-COLD OUT THERE, AND THE BLACK-WIND! THAT'S NOT GOOD FOR HER, NOT IN HER CONDITION!

MAYBE SO, BUT IT'S OUR ROUTE.

BUT LOOK! EVERYWHERE, AND ESPECIALLY IN THE PAUNCH, IT LOOKS LIKE... AUTUMN!

"ODDUM"?!

YOU COULDN'T POSSIBLY UNDERSTAND... ALSO IN THE "EXTINCT SPECIES" CATEGORY...

HOW'S THE OMELET?

HMM... NOT BAD.

YEAH, I KNOW. TOO DRY. WHAT I NEED IS MILK.

MILK...

...

?

SEE YA LATER, KID!

DAMN, THAT JONAH... HIS OMELET MIGHT BE DRY, BUT HE SURE ISN'T.

HE'S VANISHED YET AGAIN DEEP INTO THE ENTRAILS OF NOONE...

HIS "MOMMY."

HOW LONG HAS HE BEEN LIVING IN THIS ENCLOSED, COZY LITTLE WORLD, FULLY FOCUSED ON HIS CHILDISH PLEASURES?

HIS LITTLE MEALS, HIS SOMA, HIS NAPS...

AND HIS CHILDISH SECRETS, TOO...

LIKE THAT DISTILLERY HE BUILT, USING ONE OF THE BELLIES WHERE NOONE DESALINATES HER WATER.

MEMORIES.

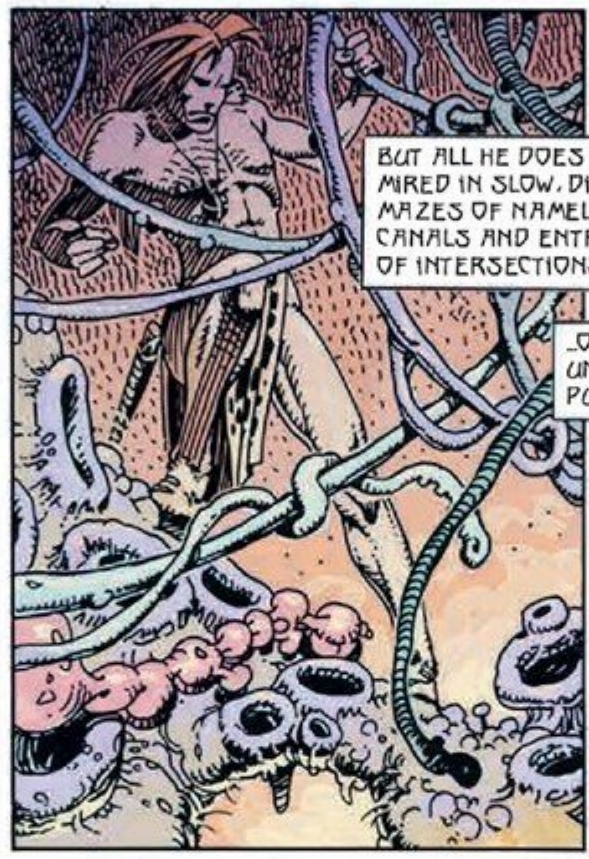
ACCAIA. THE CAVE OF THE FIRE SALTS.

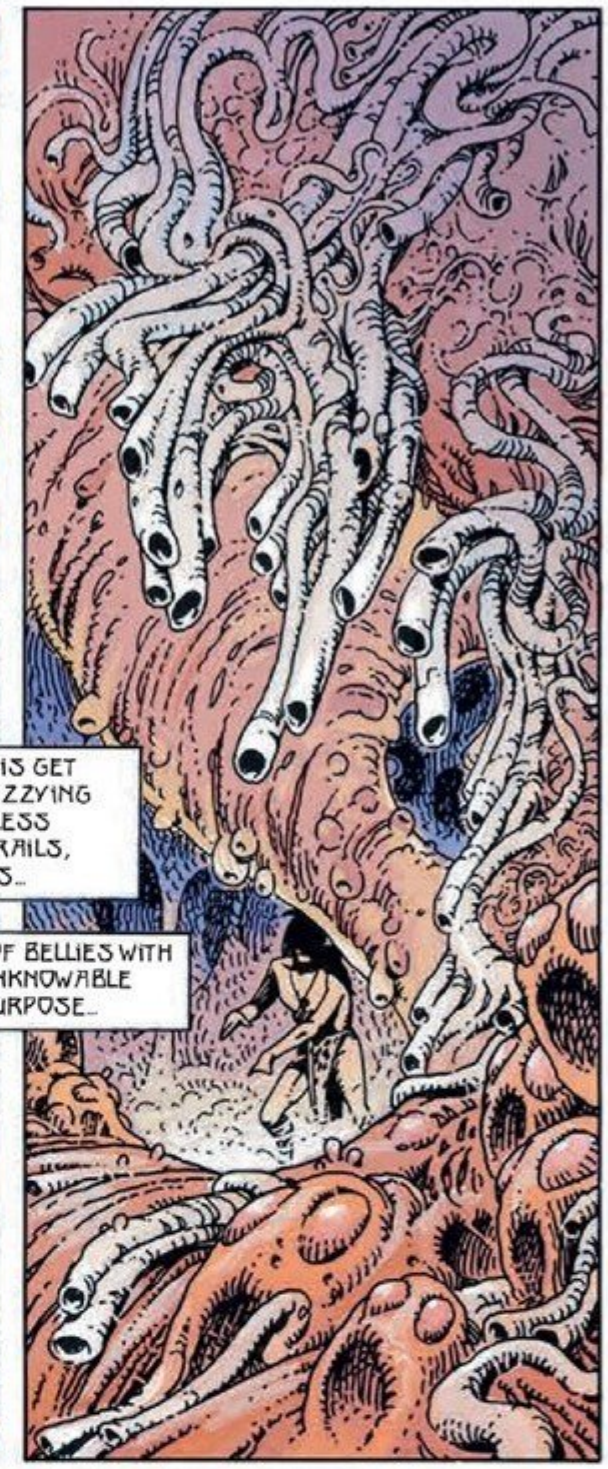
BURNING SALT.

BITTER SALT.

NOPE. WE ARE DEFINITELY NOT GETTING OUT OF HERE THIS WAY...

GETTING OUT OF HERE? UNTIL THEN, ARKADI, EVER THE DREAMER, EVER CURIOUS--YET ALREADY WEARY OF HIS OWN CURIOSITY--KEEPS EXPLORING, SEARCHING, PENETRATING EVER DEEPER INTO THE SILENT FLESH OF NOONE, SINKING INTO HER, DRINKING IN THE DARKNESS...





AND YET, ON DAY 224...

IN THE DEEPEST DEPTHS OF NOONE'S BOTTOMLESS BODY...

...HERE, AT LAST...

"... VOLUPTUOUS CALM AND SPLENDOR..."

"HERE, ALL IS BEAUTY AND ORDER...

JONAH, OF COURSE.

SO, THIS IS WHERE YOU HIDE OUT, HUH?

AND GUESS WHAT!

LOOK HOW FULL IT IS!

Hi! Hi!

IT'S ALMOST TIME!

MILK!

THERE'S GONNA BE MILK! HEE HEE!

ALMOST TIME?

WHAT'S THAT LIGHT, UP THERE?

THE AMBER EYE...

THE SPARK STOLEN FROM THE HEAVENS...

THE NAVEL OF THE SKY, THE TIP OF THE WORLD'S AXIS...

THE GATE TO THE SUN!

I THINK THAT PEARL CAPTURES AND CONCENTRATES THE RAYS OF THE SUN. THE EMBRYOS NEED IT TO INCUBATE.

SHE AGES WITH THEM. WHEN SHE COLLAPSES, IT WILL BE THE SIGNAL FOR THEM TO HATCH.

AND THERE WILL BE MILK!

THE PEARL...

THE AMBER EYE...

WE'VE DISTURBED THEM ENOUGH AS IT IS. YOU COMING? I HAVE A CAKE IN THE OVEN.

I WILL COME, YES...

LATER...

YEAR 10042, MONTH 12.

DAY 240 INSIDE NOONE.

MERIDIAN: IMAGINARY LINE JOINING THE NIGHT POLE α TO THE DAY POLE Ω AND PERPENDICULAR TO "TWILIGHT" ø

ANTARC: THE MERIDIAN AT 180° LONGITUDE WHERE DELTA Δ AND GAMMA ɣ MEET. ALSO CALLED THE "CONCEPTION" MERIDIAN.

THE ANTARC MERIDIAN CROSSES "TWILIGHT" AT THE EDGE OF A MOUNTAIN RANGE THAT WAS ONCE A CONTINENT SURROUNDED BY OCEANS. THE MOUNTAIN RANGE WAS ALSO CALLED "ANTARC."

...DERIVED FROM THE OLD WORD...

WHAT THE...? THE SCREEN!

32

...ANTARCTICA...

KLIK

K-KLIK

KLIK...

LIGHTNING-GOD! IT'S OUTTA JUICE!

PAN-DRA!

PAN-DRA!

WHERE THE HELL IS THAT WOMAN?

JONAH!

JONAH! HAVE YOU SEEN PAN-D--

!

'MM... IS IT TIME? IS THE MILK HERE?

'MMM... COLD...

SLEEEPY...

33

PAN-
DRA!

!

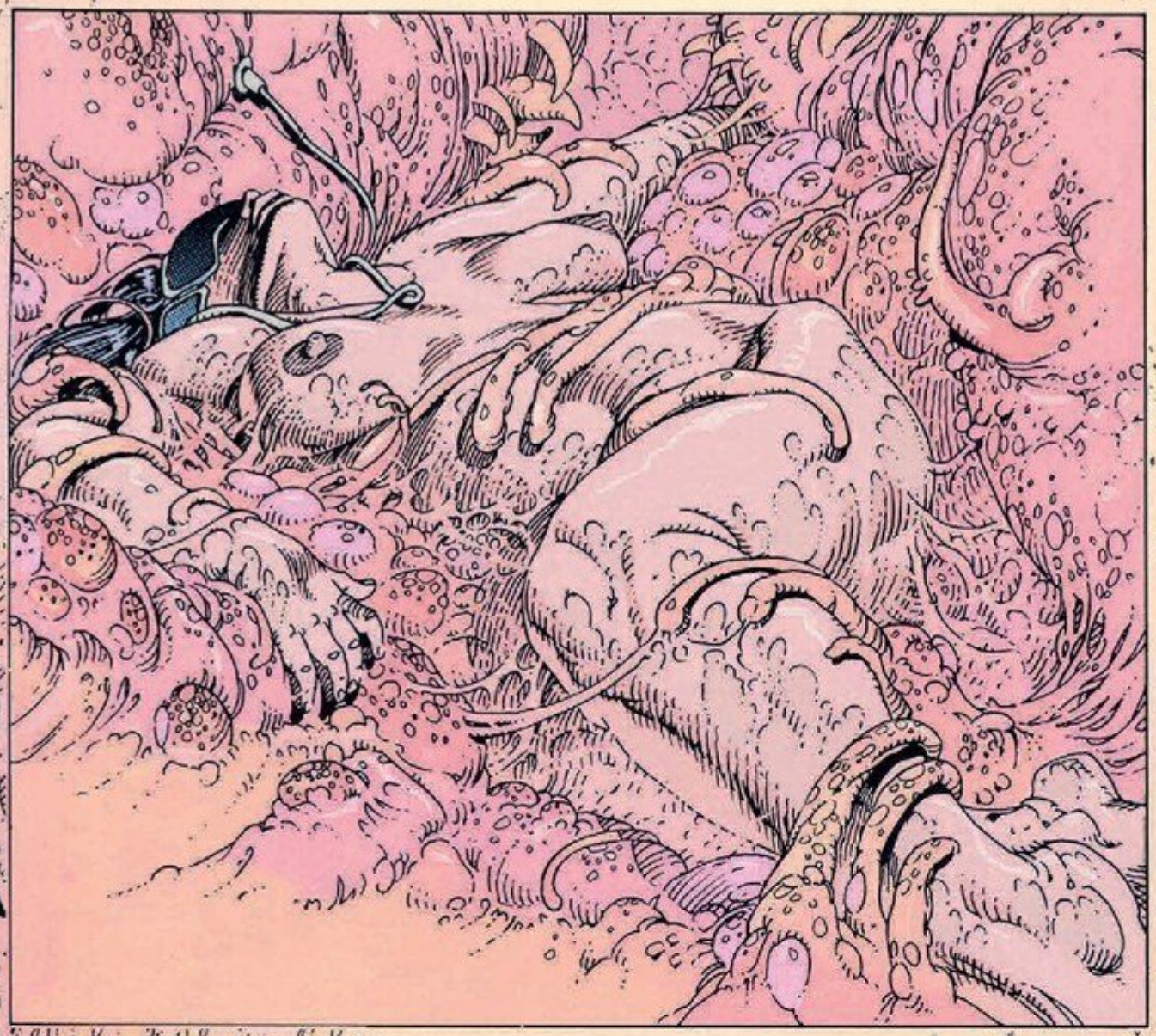
RADON!
RADON! I'M
LOOKING FOR
PAN-DRA!
WHERE--?

HOOON?

HNN... HNG...
SHEOL... GOOD.
ROTTED-BLOOD...
GOOD...

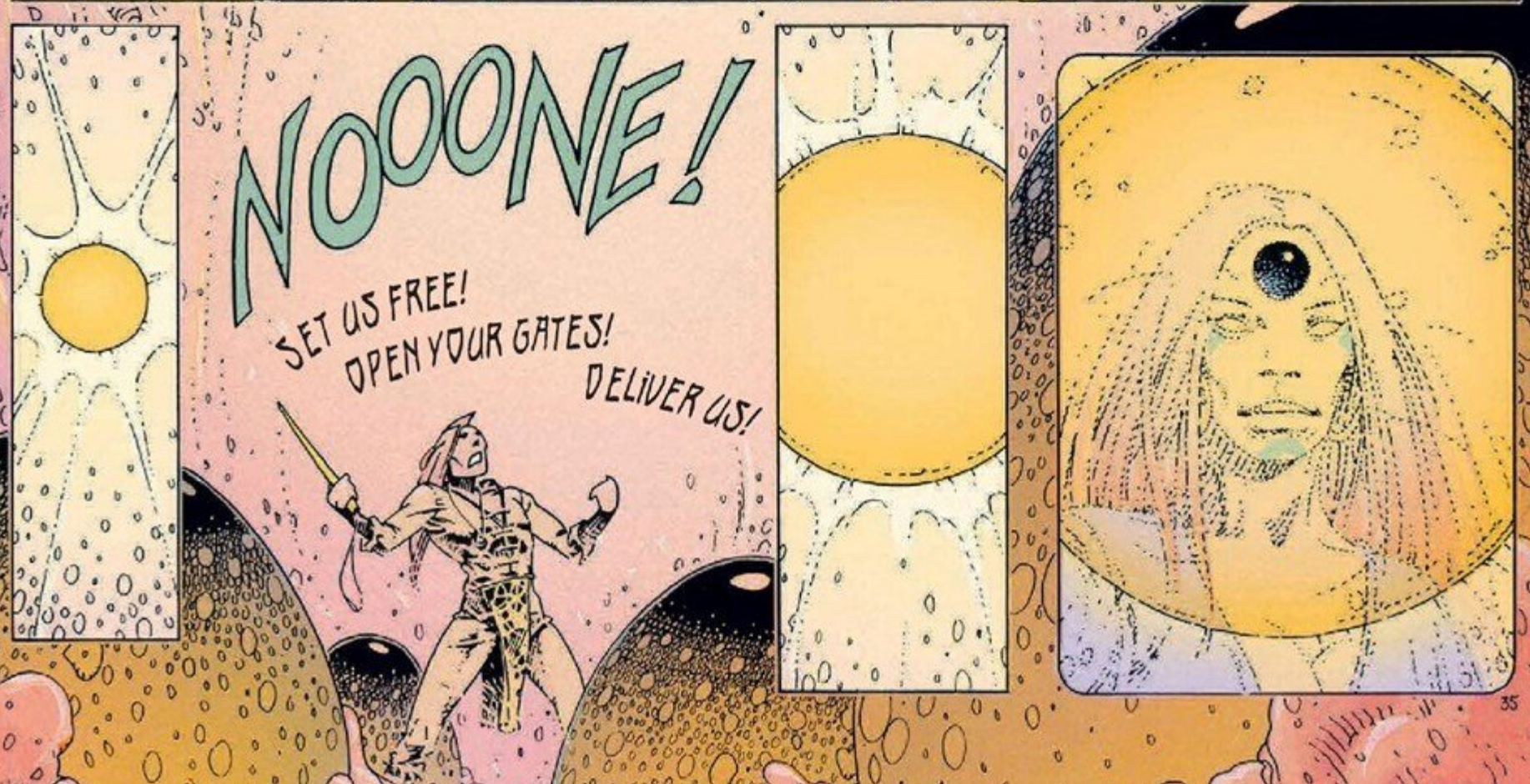
...

THE
MATRIX!



THEY'RE ALL ASLEEP...

THEY'RE ALL ASLEEP!


NOONE!
SET US FREE!
OPEN YOUR GATES!
DELIVER US!

"SUCH CONFUSION, SON...

"ARKADI... THE ISLAND OF ACCAIA IS THE HEART OF THE WORLD... IT IS OUR HOME AND OUR PRISON...

"...MY CAVE, THE BELLY OF MY MOTHER...

"AND YET, YOU WILL LEAVE HERE SOON...

"HAVE YOU BROUGHT BACK THE FIRE SALT?

"YOU WERE GIVEN A SIGN...

"DAATH--KNOWLEDGE...AND YESOD--FOUNDATION.

"DON'T LOOK BACK...

"FOLLOW THE GOLD, ARKADI..."

"ALBE... MOTHER..."

"THE GOLD."

"I KNOW!"

ARKADI KNOWS.

HE KNOWS HE IS IN A GREENHOUSE, WHERE HE HAS NEARLY FINISHED GROWING.

HE KNOWS THAT GROWING TAKES TIME AND HARD WORK.

FROM DAY 241 TO DAY 265 INSIDE NOONE, HE WORKS HARD.

HE KNOWS IT WILL FEEL LIKE DELIVERANCE. LIKE HEALING AFTER A LONG BOUT OF FEVER...

LIKE WAKING UP FROM A LONG SLEEP...

LIKE BEING BORN...

AT LONG LAST, ON DAY 266 INSIDE NOONE.

...

NOONE?

?

THIS IS IT! THE MILK IS COMING!

MILK! MILK!

HEE! HEE!

HNN? MILK?

SOMETHING... ISN'T... RIGHT...

NOONE...?

NOONE HAS STOPPED WALKING!

WHAT THE...

!

ARE YOU NUTS?! SALT, HERE?! THE MILK WILL BE SPOILED!

NOT GOOD!

WHAT ABOUT HER YOUNG?! HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT THE YOUNG?!

KRii...

UP HERE! THIS WAY! I FOUND OUR WAY OUT!

THE EYE OF AMBER!

OUT!

39

BROOOUU...

ARKA-DIII!

NO!

OUT!

LET US OUT!

THE MILK!

NOONE!

NOONE!

YOU'RE HURTING HER! YOU'LL KILL HER! STOP!

"AND SHE WAS WITH CHILD AND CRIED OUT, BEING IN PAIN AND IN LABOR TO GIVE BIRTH!"

BOOM!

NOONE!

NOO NOO!

NOT THAT! UP THERE, DIRECTLY ABOVE THE CITY, IS THE WORLD...

OUR WONDERFUL, TERRIFYING WORLD...

BRO

BOOM!

THE GREAT...

THE GREAT...

LET ME GO, WHITE WORM!

YOU CHOSEN ASSHOLE!

40

THE MILK!

THE MILK!

NOONE!

NOOO

THE LUZ!

THE SUN GATE!

KRAK-KAAK!

NOOOOK

THE GOLD!

OOOOOH!

ARKADI!

41

H!

ARKADI BELIEVED IT WOULD BE LIKE BEING BORN.

AND IT IS...

THE GREAT EXTERIOR! NO!

NOT THE GREAT EXTERIOR!

ARKADI!

BUT IT IS ALSO...

...LIKE DYING.

ARKADI!

NOO

NOOO

"MASS DAMMIT! THE BLACK-WIND GOT HIM!"

NOOOOOOOOH...

WHERE IS MY BLASTED BAG? MY ARMOR? MY WEAPONS?!

RADOOON!!

IS IT ALL HERE? I NEED ARKADY'S BLANKET, TOO! HAND IT OVER!

HNN!

MASS DAMMIT! HOW COULD I LET IT COME TO THIS?!

HNH...

"Hi"

HAA!

HNN! HOW-D'YOU-DO-THAT?

PYROLYSIS!

ALL RIGHT. TIME TO GO.

HNN? WHERE-YOU-GO?

TO GET THE KID. I CAN RUN FASTER THAN THAT CURSED BLACK-WIND!

CH-CHNK!

BLAM!

AND- COMING- BACK-HNN?

AGAINST THE WIND, I CAN WALK, RADON.

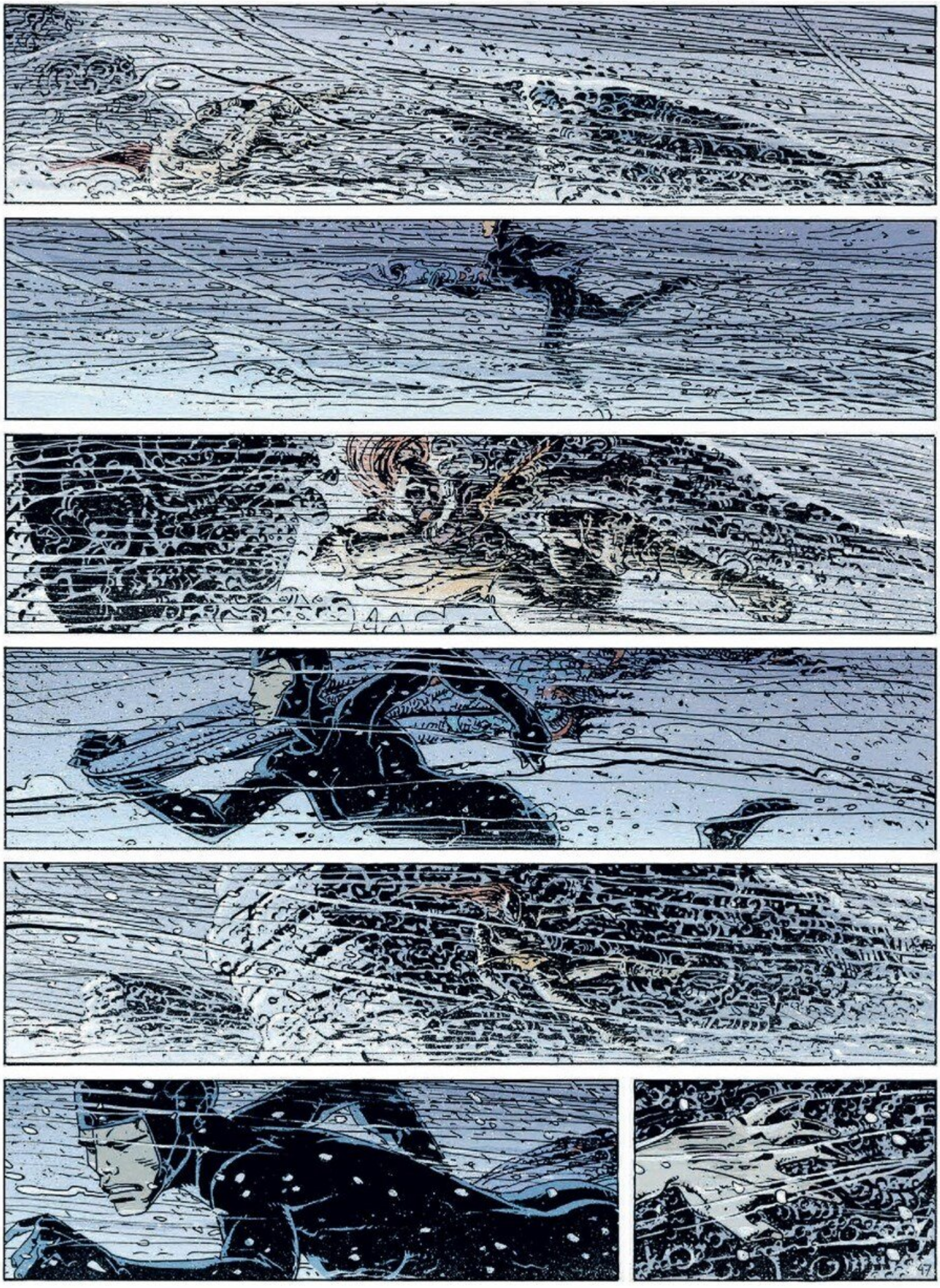
WAIT FOR US...

...AND KEEP AN EYE ON FAT JONAH.

IF HE IS WHAT I *THINK* HE IS...WE'RE GOING TO NEED HIM.

"BE RIGHT BACK."

46



HNNNNNN!

NOONE!

NOOO! NOT THE GREAT EXTERIOR!

NOT WINTER!

NOOOOOOOOONE!

PAN-DRA?!

YEAH, IT'S ME, KID. I'M HERE.

I'VE GOT YOU.

THE COLD, PAN-DRA... I NEVER IMAGINED... THE COLD.

IT'S ALL GOOD NOW, KID. ALL GOOD.

"LET'S GO BACK."

HMM...

MONSTER OF THE GREAT EXTERIOR ENDOWED WITH MUTABILITY...

COULD YOU TAKE ME TO THE ONE THEY CALL PAN-DRA? I HAVE IMPORTANT INFORMATION TO REVEAL TO HER.

HNN?

PAN-DRA... IT'S NOT A COINCIDENCE NOONE STOPPED HERE. I SAW THE COORDINATES ON THE SCREEN.

THEY'RE THE ONES WE PROGRAMMED.

I KNOW, ARKADI. YOU DIDN'T DO ANYTHING WRONG. YOU WERE A GREAT PILOT.

I'M THE ONE WHO SLEPT TOO MUCH!

IS THAT... IS THAT NOONE?

NO, WAY TOO BIG. WE MUST HAVE DEVIATED OFF COURSE.

IT LOOKS LIKE A WALL... A WALL BUILT BY GIANTS!

WIND'S EASING UP...

THAT WALL IS BLOCKING IT.

50

THE SKY IS OPENING UP!

THE RING-MOON!

THE RING-MOON... I SAW THAT IN YOUR "DREAM" BOX, BUT...

WELL, LOOK WHO'S HERE!

HNNNNNNN!

YOO-HOO!

"RADON?!

"JONAH?!"

NOONE!

MY MOTHER AND MY GODDESS...

THE GREAT GEOPHAGIC WHALE...

SHE'S DEAD!

AND I CAN BEAR THE SIGHT OF THE SKY!

WELCOME TO THE GREAT EXTERIOR, CHOSEN ONE JONAH...

OR SHOULD I CALL YOU...

...OM-6?

!

OH... SO YOU FIGURED IT OUT...

WHO ELSE WOULD HAVE KNOWN TO PLUG RIGHT INTO THE BRAIN OF THAT BEAST?

WHO ELSE WOULD BE SUFFICIENTLY MOTIVATED TO LEAVE DIS DESPITE HIS...

LISTEN! LOOK!

"I HAD A DREAM. THE WALL OF THE CENTURIES APPEARED BEFORE ME."

WHAT THE... THAT NOISE I HEAR...

THAT NOISE YOU HEAR, ARKADI, IS THE VOICE OF THE ONE FOR WHOM I HAVE ROAMED THE WORLD TEN YEARS TO FIND...

...THE ONE WHOSE SERVANT I SHALL BE FOREVER...

THAT "NOISE," AS YOU SAY, IS CALLED *MUSIC!*

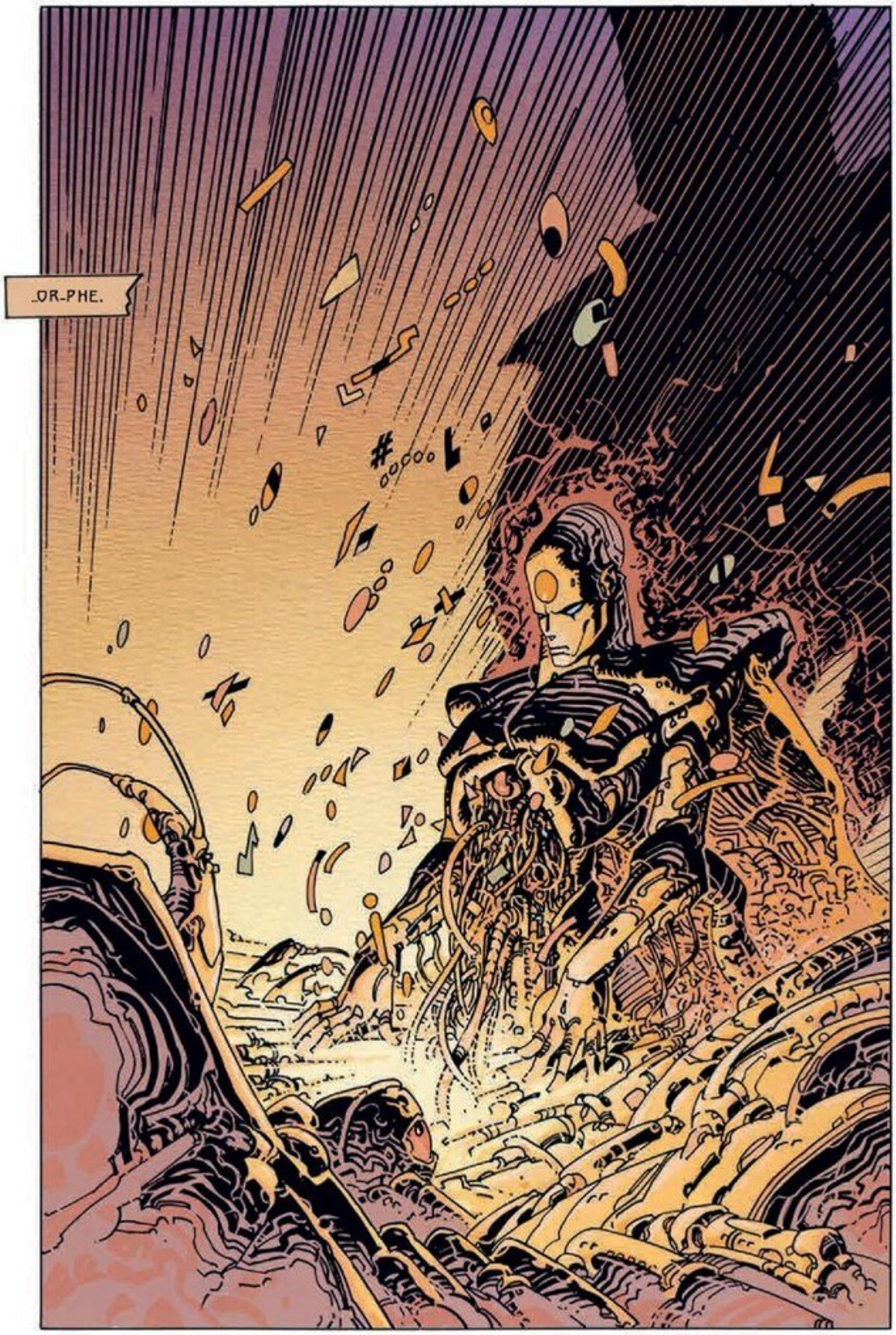
HNN. PRETTY!

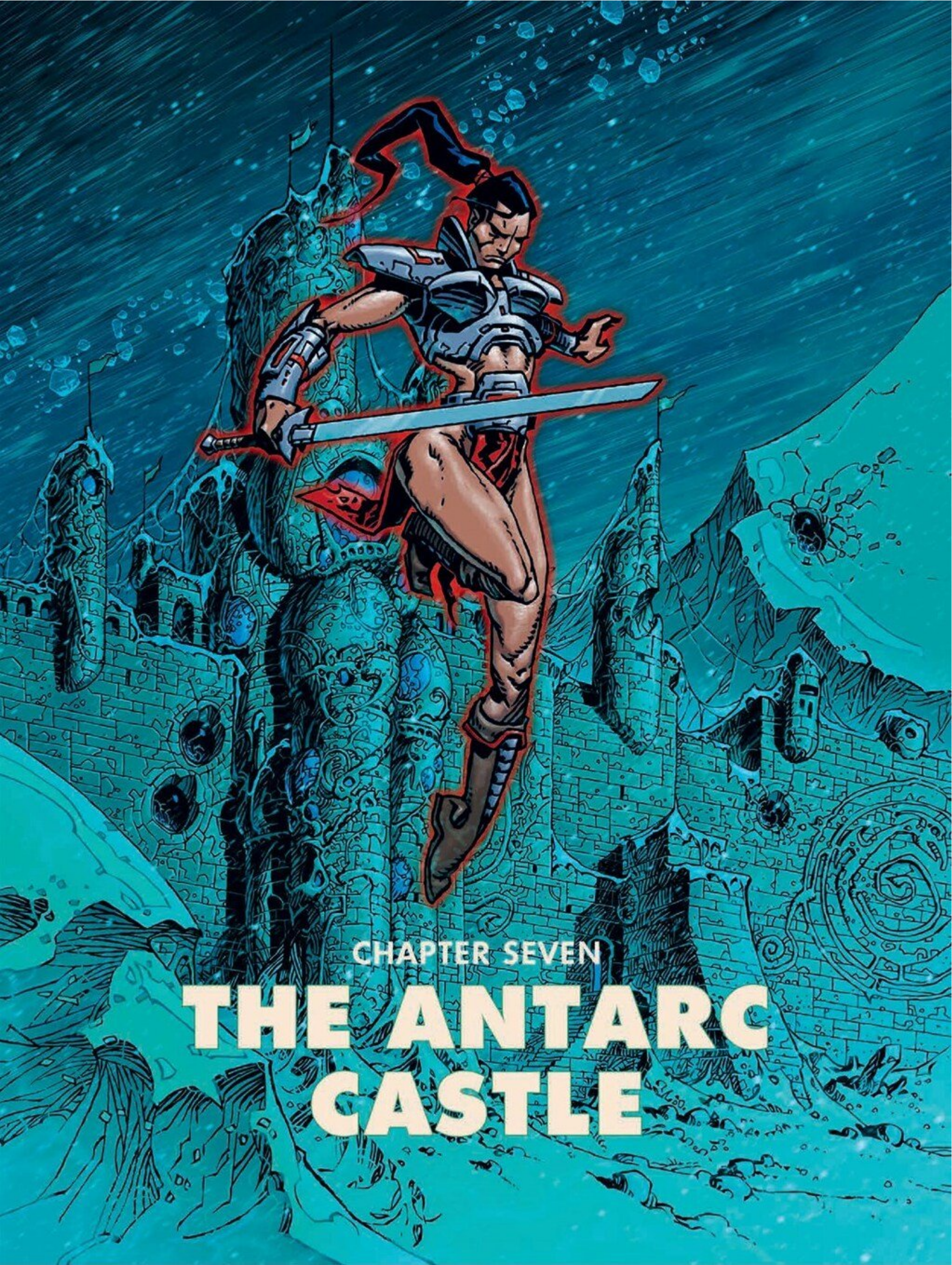
COME! WE'VE TARRIED LONG ENOUGH.

HE'S WAITING FOR US.

ON THE ROAD THAT LEADS TO KRO-NO, THE SLEEPING GOD, YOU WILL ENCOUNTER ANOTHER GUIDE...

...THE MAKER OF DREAMS...


_OR-PHE.


CHAPTER SEVEN
THE ANTARC CASTLE

YEAR 10043 OF *THE STILL ERA.*

COORDINATES
0° ALPHA
0° OMEGA
180° DELTA
180° GAMMA.

AT THE EDGE OF ANTARC, THE CONTINENT ONCE CALLED ANTARCTICA... AT THE INTERSECTION WITH THE GREAT CIRCLE OF *TWILIGHT* AND THE ANTARC MERIDIAN, THE POINT WHERE *NIGHT* TOUCHES *DAY* AND WHERE RIGHT TOUCHES LEFT... IS...

...THE WALL.

THE WALL IS WHAT REMAINS OF THE GREAT RAMPART. IT WAS BUILT BY THE LAST OF THE OMS AT THE START OF THE STILL ERA TO SEPARATE THE DIURNAL FROM THE NOCTURNAL ZONES.
A BARRIER AGAINST NIGHT.
OF THE MANY BASTIONS ONCE ERECTED ON TOP OF THE WALL, ONLY ONE REMAINS: ANTARC CASTLE.
THE LAST MUSEUM...
A RELIQUARY OF ALL OF HUMANITY'S ARTISTIC CULTURE, FROM ITS DAWN ON THE WALLS OF CAVES TO ITS FINAL DAYS IN OTHERS MADE OF ICE AND NANO-FORMATTED CONCRETE.
A DEAD MONUMENT TO ART ACROSS TIME.
2

ANTARC CASTLE, A COLOSSAL WRECK, A FOSSILIZED CITY WHERE THE WINDS WEEP...

...WHERE THE WINDS SING.

"COLD IS YOUR HAND, COLD ARE YOUR BODY AND BONES...

"COLD IS YOUR SLEEP OF DEATH UNDER THE ARCHING CEILINGS...

"COLD IS YOUR PALE FACE IN THE GREEN LIGHT OF THE TOMBS.

"I NOW KNOW THAT YOU WILL NEVER RISE FROM YOUR BED OF STONE...

"...YOUR BED OF ASHES."

APPROACH, VOYAGERS.

OR-PHE, MY PRINCE, AWAITS YOU.

A GHOST...? OR HOLOGRAM?

HOLOGRAM!

THIS WAY.

SIT. REST. EAT.

EAT? EVERYTHING IN HERE IS MOLDY!

HNN?

IS THE FIRE ALSO A HOLO--

OUCH! NOPE!

FIND US SOMETHING, JONAH! I NEED PROTEIN!

THERE'S *NUTRIENT!* JUST LIKE IN DIS!

NO-ABLE -EAT-THIS- *HNN!*

FOR THE FIRST FEW CENTURIES AFTER IT WAS BUILT, ANTARC CASTLE HOUSED THE WORLD'S LAST ARTISTS.

THEY EITHER DIED WITHOUT HEIRS OR FLEW UP TOWARDS THE SUN, HANGING FROM GIANT KITES.

5

"THE SUN WILL GO OUT, THE RING-MOON WILL BREAK ITS CHAINS..

"...THE BLACK-WIND WILL BLOW AGAIN, AGAIN ACROSS THE STARS...

"... AND YOU WILL REMAIN HERE, WOMAN OF SHADOWS...

"...LYING DEEP IN THE HEART OF DEAD MEMORIES...

"...UNTIL THE HIDDEN GOD AWAKES..."

"FEAR NOT... ON THE ROAD THAT LEADS TO ME, YOU WILL ENCOUNTER OTHER SIGNS...

"AND ANOTHER GUIDE...

"OR-PHE."

"THE DREAM-MAKER..

"...AND HE RAISES HIS RIGHT ARM OVER THE SLEEPING EARTH."

OR-PHE, I...

OH... WHAT HAVE THEY TURNED YOU INTO?! A THING!

YOU'VE JOURNEYED A LONG WAY ON THE PATH TO THE PRODIGAL, O BARBARIAN FROM THE GREAT EXTERIOR.

THOUSANDS OF KMETS... YEARS...

IN SEARCH OF YOU... OR-PHE.

HOW DO YOU KNOW ME?

...

WHO ARE YOU?

...

YOUR VOICE HAS A FAMILIAR RING. LIKE A RECURRING NIGHTMARE OF OLD.

I AM DIS'S EMISSARY. HEL'S ENVOY...

CREATED TO...

WHO ARE YOU?

I AM...

...PAN-DRA.

IS THIS IT?

OR-PHE!

WHAT THE...

OH!

WHAT A MESS!

I'VE CERTAINLY GOT MY WORK CUT OUT FOR ME... I NEED TO FIND ALL THE PARTS...AND REBOOT THE WHOLE THING!

OM-6?!

YES. I'VE COME, OR-PHE, MY MASTER.

I TRAVELED ACROSS *THE GREAT EXTERIOR* TO RESCUE YOU...

I KNEW YOU NEEDED MY HELP!

ME? NEED YOU?!

HEE! HEE!

FORGIVE ME, OM-6, MY SERVANT. I NEVER MASTERED LAUGHTER.

AND I DO NOT NEED YOU.

NOR DO I NEED THAT DRESSED-UP, TWO-HEADED BARBARIAN CHILD, OR THAT...

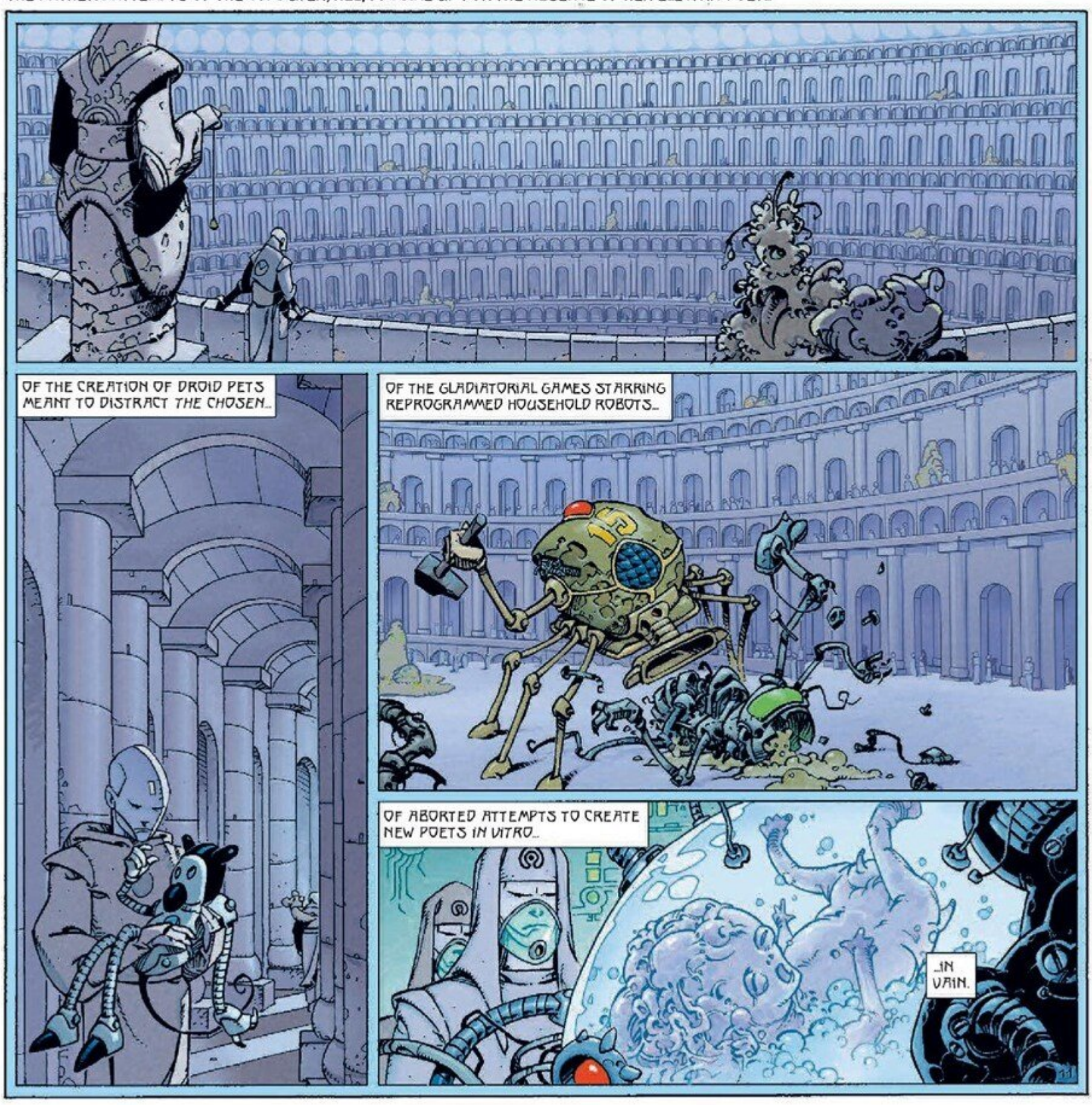
...WOMAN.

?

?

HNN!

AND JONAH TOLD HIS STORY. HE SPOKE OF DIS AFTER BOTH HE AND OR-PHE LEFT--DIS, A CITY STRUGGLING FROM LACK OF "DREAMS." HE SPOKE OF THE PATHETIC ATTEMPTS OF THE COMPUTER, HEL, TO MAKE UP FOR THE ABSENCE OF HER ELECTRIC POET...



HE TOLD HOW HE EXPLORED THE D.R.E.A.M. NETWORK AND ITS FREQUENCIES FOR WAYS TO REACH OR-PHE.

...IN VAIN.

"I'M DISCONNECTED FROM DIS, YES. I DID WHAT WAS NECESSARY."

THE SOURCE OF THE DREAMS RAN DRY. THE CHOSEN WERE WITHERING AWAY.

CAN YOU IMAGINE DIS WITHOUT HER POET?

WITHOUT THE SUN?

WITHOUT THE SUN?! BUT... WHAT ABOUT PRO-ME?!

THE TITAN PRO-ME WAS TWO YEARS BEHIND SCHEDULE. THE SUN THAT LIGHTS UP THE DOME WAS ALREADY AS WEAKENED AS A LIGHT BULB AT THE END OF ITS LIFE EXPECTANCY.

NIGHT WAS STARTING TO TAKE OVER THE CITY UNDER THE ICE.

WE SAW PRO-ME IN ACCAIA, ARKADI'S VILLAGE, IN MEDITERRA.

BUT WHO KNOWS WHERE HE IS NOW?

I KNEW HEL HAD SENT PROBE-BOTS OUT LOOKING FOR YOU, OR-PHE...

...AND SOME OTHER THING, TOO.

THAT "OTHER THING" WAS ME!

AND SO I THOUGHT TO MYSELF, "WHY NOT ME?"...WHY NOT LEAVE?

BUT FIRST, I HAD TO LEARN AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE ABOUT THE GREAT EXTERIOR.

OM-6 STARTED BY INSERTING NEURAL IMPLANTS INTO HIS BODY TO PLUG IN AND HAVE DIRECT ACCESS TO HEL'S MEMORIES.

FOR MONTHS HE EXPLORED THE MOST ACCESSIBLE PARTS OF THE CYBERMATRIX.

HE ABSORBED ALL KINDS OF KNOWLEDGE: HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY, CLIMATES, DEAD LANGUAGES, FAUNA AND FLORA...

BUT HE ALSO ABSORBED ALL SORTS OF RANDOM, "USELESS" FILES, FROM THE BIBLE TO MEDIEVAL POETRY, FROM GENETIC SURGERY TO DISTILLATION...

NOT TO MENTION ANCIENT CUISINES.

HE-FAS-TUS, THE TITAN-METALWORKER, HELPED HIM FIX AN EARTHLY MODULE AND EQUIP IT WITH BLACKED-OUT, ARMORED WINDOWS AND AN AUTO-PILOT FUNCTION--HE KNEW THAT AGORAPHOBIA WOULD KEEP HIM FROM PILOTING BY SIGHT.

AND SO, IT WAS WITHOUT SIGHT, LIKE ADAM BANISHED FROM THE GARDEN OF EDEN, THAT HE SET OUT INTO THE FROZEN LAND, LOADED WITH ENERGY CELLS AND REPLACEMENT PARTS FOR OR-PHE.

NIGHT AND ICE... ENDLESS... ACROSS THOUSANDS OF KMETS.

EVENTUALLY I BROKE DOWN, IN THE MIDDLE OF SOME DEATH-DEPTH SOMEWHERE, WHICH IS WHEN NOONE SWALLOWED UP MY MACHINE ... WITH ME INSIDE.

I LIVED INSIDE THE GROUND-EATING BEAST FOR WHO KNOWS HOW MANY MONTHS OR YEARS. I EVENTUALLY FORGOT WHY I WAS THERE, WHERE I WAS FROM ... AND WHO I WAS.

AND THEN, THESE GUYS SHOWED UP.

DON'T YOU TOUCH THAT, CHILD-MONSTER!

MY NAME IS ARKADI!

AND I KNOW WHAT I'M DOING!

...

PAN-DRA TAUGHT ME.

IT'S TRUE.

BESIDES, THE SCREEN ON WHICH I SAW YOU WAS HIS MOTHER'S "MAGIC MIRROR."

?!

A NEXUS OF THE D.R.E.A.M. NETWORK! I KNEW IT!

...

DREAM-SCREENS FROM AROUND THE WORLD!

THE GREAT EXTERIOR!

WHAT ARE THESE BLACK SCREENS?

MANY DREAM-SCREENS ARE EITHER DEAD...

THAT ONE, THAT'S...

MY HOME, YES. ALBE'S CAVE...

THE MAGIC MIRROR CAN STILL SEE!

...OR THEY ONLY SHOW THE PAST.

ARCHIVES. SAVED FILES.

IF EVERY-THING HAS BEEN RECORDED, THEN WE CAN SEE...

...BEFORE!

PAN-DRA! THAT'S YOU! IN ALBE-MOTHER'S HOME!

BY THE MASS! SO YOU SAW ME, OR-PHE?!

YOU KNEW!

DO YOU THINK SCREENS-OR MIRRORS-ONLY WORK ONE WAY?

WHEN YOU LOOK INTO ONE, SOMEONE, SOMEWHERE, SEES YOU-ALWAYS.

FURTHER BACK... FURTHER...

CAREFUL WITH THE DREAM-SCREENS, ARKADI. YOU CAN DROWN IN THEM.

THEY'RE JUST ARCHIVES... SAVED FILES...

THE WELL OF DEAD MEMORIES IS FULL OF THEM...

I... I'LL BE FINE.

BUT THERE'S ONE LAST THING I NEED TO SEE IN THE "MIRROR..." A LITTLE FURTHER BACK STILL.

THERE! *ARKAS!* THAT'S MY FATHER!

WOW... I GUESS HE REALLY *DOES* LOOK LIKE ME, HUH?

YES! I'M SURE OF IT NOW: THIS BEYONDER WHOSE GENETIC CODE YOUR PRECIOUS HEL STOLE TO...*MAKE YOU*...THAT WAS MY FATHER!

AND TO THINK YOU MADE *ADVANCES* ON ME INSIDE NOONE!

LISTEN!

IF YOUR FAMILIAL REMINISCING IS OVER, PERHAPS YOU'LL AGREE TO LISTEN TO OR-PHE.

I SAW THAT BROODING MAN BACK THEN... HIS IMAGE IN THE MIRROR INSPIRED ONE OF MY MOST BEAUTIFUL "DREAMS": AN EPIC BARBARIAN SAGA.

I SANG ABOUT THAT NAMELESS MAN, THAT GIANT WITH THE BROKEN HEART AND SHATTERED FOREHEAD, THE CURSED WARRIOR WHO WANDERED ACROSS THE BLUE STRETCHES OF THE ICE FIELDS, THE SALT FLATS OF *A-TLAN*, THE BOULDERS OF THE *DRAGON BARRIER*...

"I SANG ABOUT YOUR QUEST, O WARRIOR, AND ABOUT HOW YOU DELIVERED THE UNICORN BEAST THAT THE FIRE DRAGONS HELD CAPTIVE IN THEIR GHASTLY TOWER."

"THE SKANDS WITH THE SCARLET HAIR GAVE YOU ARMOR AND A HELMET THAT ONLY YOU COULD WEAR, AND A SWORD FORGED IN THE METALFIRE EXTRACTED FROM THE FORBIDDEN FLESH OF RAD.

"THE SWORD WHOSE ENCHANTED BLADE ABOLISHES ALL MATTER AND FORM FROM SPACE AND TIME ITSELF.

"THE SWORD THAT BURNS THE HAND AND SOUL OF HE WHO WIELDS IT, BUT GIVES HIM VICTORY.

"YOU ENTERED, NAMELESS WARRIOR, HE OF WHOM I SING, INTO THE FIERY LAIR OF THE DRAGONS.

"YOU FOUGHT STRONTI AND KOBAL, AND THE TWO URANES, SONS OF PLUTO.

"YOU BATTLED AND YOU STRUCK, OBLITERATING THE BLACK CERAMIC SEAL OF THE FORTIFICATIONS, THE GRANITE OF THE RAMPARTS AND TOWERS, THE WALLS AND THE CAVES...

"AND BEHOLD: YOU SHATTERED THAT GHASTLY TOWER!

"AND YOU LIBERATED THE GOLDEN UNICORN, THE BEAST OF FIRE AND VERMILLION, THAT IT MAY WALK THE EARTH WITH MEN AND ILLUMINATE IT."

SUCH IS THE "DREAM" I COMPOSED IN THOSE DAYS, WHEN I BEHELD THE IMAGE OF THAT MAN IN THE MIRROR...

YOUR FATHER, YOUNG MAN, IF I AM TO BELIEVE YOU.

—

ARKADI, SON OF ARKAS, THEN.

YES... THAT INDEED IS WHAT HE WAS. A GIANT. A DRAGON-SLAYER!

BUT...

BUT THIS "DREAM..." THIS TALE... COULD OTHERS SEE IT AS WELL?

AND IF SO, WHICH "OTHERS?"

I AM NO LONGER IN DIS. HERE, MY DREAMS ARE MINE, AND MINE ALONE.

NO! I MEAN...THE NETWORK!

THERE! OR THERE!

YOU BROADCAST YOUR DREAMS ON WHAT'S LEFT OF THE NETWORK!

PERHAPS. BUT... THERE AREN'T MANY PEOPLE LEFT ON EARTH TO SEE THEM... JUST GHOSTS...

WHAT ABOUT *UNDER* THE EARTH? KRO-NO? OR LEGION?

HOW DO YOU KNOW OF KRO-NO? AND LEGION? THE FIRST TITANS! EVEN *THE CHOSEN* DO NOT--

THE SLEEPING GOD ...AND HIS GUARDIAN. THAT IS ALL MY MOTHER TOLD ME.

...

THEY FIGHT OVER MY DREAMS. THE ONE CALLS TO ME, THE OTHER HINDERS ME.

I'VE QUERIED PAN-DRA'S BOX, BUT ALL I EVER GET IS "ACCESS DENIED"!

SOMETHING HOVERS AROUND YOU, YOUNG BARBARIAN... SOMETHING BIG AND DANGEROUS...THAT I DO NOT UNDERSTAND.

LEAVE! ALL OF YOU!

NOT YOU, OM-6--JONAH. STAY!

BUT I--

COME, PAN-DRA.

SO THAT WAS OR-PHE... MY NEW "GUIDE"?!

"THE DREAM MAKER..." THE TITAN? THAT'S HIM?!

THAT GOLEM CHAINED TO HIS MACHINES!

A RAY OF SUNLIGHT IMPRISONED IN A MIRROR...

...?

HNN!

THE PRINCE-POET WISHES TO SEE YOU, YOUNG MAN.

I'M COMING.

23

I'VE TOLD OR-PHE ABOUT THE EVENTS THAT UNFOLDED IN *DIS* IN THE MONTHS FOLLOWING HIS DEPARTURE. WE'VE CROSS-REFERENCED THEM WITH HIS OWN RECOLLECTIONS, AND I SEARCHED THROUGH HIS MEMORIES.

IT WAS SHORTLY AFTER MOVED IN HERE, FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF THE CLONE U-RI-D-C...

IN 10024, TO BE PRECISE!

...THAT I SAW THE IMAGE OF THAT WARRIOR--YOUR FATHER--AND THAT I COMPOSED THAT "DREAM."

OR-PHE POSTED IT ON HIS SCREENS, HERE... AND BY THE SAME TOKEN, ON THE GHOST NETWORK, AS YOU SUSPECTED.

THAT'S WHEN KRO-NO STARTED HAVING DREAMS, GOING BY WHAT LEGION REPORTED TO HEL.

—

THE DATES MATCH.

PERHAPS THERE'S A SORT OF...HARMONY...A SPECIAL RESONANCE BETWEEN OR-PHE AND KRO-NO...OR BETWEEN THIS CASTLE AND KRO-NO...?

SO IT WAS *YOU* THEN, OR-PHE, THE DREAM MASTER, WHO DISTURBED THE SLUMBER OF THE SLEEPING GOD... HE SAW YOUR "DREAM" AND MADE IT HIS OWN.

UNLESS *HE* WAS THE ONE WHO INSPIRED THE DREAM IN *ME*...WHAT DO DATES AND TIME EVEN MEAN NOW THAT THE EARTH HAS STOPPED SPINNING? WHAT GOOD ARE THE LAWS OF *CAUSALITY* NEXT TO THE LAWS OF *SYNCHRONICITY*?

AND THEN, HE CALLED ME...

BUT WHY?

AND WHY *ME*?!

HOW SHOULD I KNOW, YOUNG ARKADI?

—

AND YET...

LISTEN AND SEE.

"IN THOSE DAYS--IN THE AGE OF LIGHT--RAD, THE MAD GOD, BORN OF THE EARTH'S CORE--MATERIA PRIMA--RULED OVER THE WORLD AND DISPENSED LIGHT AND WARMTH TO HIS CREATURES, THE OMS."

AND THE OMS LIVED IN THE SACRED GLOW OF RAD'S ENERGY.

"BUT THE YOUNG GOD, WHO HAD DEVOURED HIS OWN MOTHER, ALONG WITH HIS OWN ENTRAILS, ALSO PRODUCED LARGE QUANTITIES OF FOUL EXCREMENT THAT HE SPREAD ACROSS THE WORLD.

"THE STENCH THEY EMANATED CORRUPTED PLANTS, ANIMALS, AND EVEN THE BLOOD OF THE OMS.

"THE BELLIES OF THE MOTHERS GREW TOXIC, BRINGING FORTH INTO THE WORLD STILLBORN LARVA, DROOLING THINGS WITH ROTTED BLOOD."

"AND THUS, THE AGE OF SHADOWS SUCCEEDED THE AGE OF LIGHT—LIKE A LONG MOAN...

"THE LAST OF THE OMS HUDDLED HAGGARD AND STUPEFIED IN THEIR MACHINE-CITIES, AND STRANGE CREATURES COULD BE SEEN AT THE EDGE OF THE CAVES AND IN THE SHADE OF THE WOODS AS A HEAVY GLOOM DESCENDED ON THE WORLD.

"BUT THEN A SAGE ROSE UP, THE TITAN KRO-NO, THE TIME ELDER.

"HE SAW THE DEVASTATION THAT HAD BEEN WREAKED UPON THE WORLD, AND HE SPOKE, SAYING, 'THIS IS NOT GOOD.'

"HE ARMED HIMSELF WITH THE SUN AND THE WIND, WITH RIVERS AND TIDES...AND HE FOUGHT RAD.

"AFTER 666 YEARS OF RELENTLESS COMBAT, HE DEFEATED RAD.

"AND THEN, HE HEAPED UPON HIM HIS IMMORTAL EXCREMENT SEALED IN TOMBS OF LEAD.

"THIS, HE CALLED THE MASS.

"HE CURSED THE MASS. PLUNGED IT DEEP INTO THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH. AND CHAINED IT TO THE BOTTOM OF THE WELL OF DEAD MEMORIES.

"THEN, HE CREATED A TITAN OF ONE THOUSAND AND TEN THOUSAND BODIES OF LEAD ANIMATED BY A SINGLE THOUGHT. HE NAMED HIM LEGION.

"HE PLACED LEGION IN THE ABYSS TO GUARD THE MASS, THAT NOTHING MAY COME OUT OF IT--EVER--AND THAT NONE MAY ACCESS IT--EVER.

"AND HE SPOKE, SAYING, 'THIS IS GOOD.'

"ALAS... ALAS, IT WAS TOO LATE, FOR THE GREAT EVIL HAD BEEN DONE: MATERIA-PRIMA--THE MOTHER-EARTH--DID NOT SURVIVE THE ABOMINATION.

"THE MASS, THE BLACK SICKNESS, THE ULTIMATE CORRUPTIVE FORCE, CONTAMINATED THE HEART THAT MADE THE WORLD GO 'ROUND.

"THE IMMEASURABLE WHEEL OF ETERNITY SLOWED IN ITS ROTATION... SLOWED SOME MORE, AND MORE STILL...AND THEN STOPPED. STILL. FIXED IN PLACE."

AND THEN KRO-NO TRAVELED DOWN TO THE BOTTOM OF THE WORLD...WHERE *THE MASS* WAS. FOR HE WANTED TO KNOW.

"WHAT HAPPENED THERE, IN THE SECRECY OF THE WELL OF DEAD MEMORIES, NOBODY KNOWS.

"FOR EVER SINCE, TEN THOUSAND YEARS NOW, CLOAKED IN OBLIVION, KRO-NO SLEEPS."

AND NOW, BEHOLD, IT IS *THE STILL ERA*: AN UNMOVING EARTH, A WORLD THAT *DAY* AND *NIGHT* DIVIDE--FOREVERMORE.

GODS! A FABLE FOR CHILDREN! KRO-NO IS A DAMN LEGEND, LIKE THE ONES MY MOTHER TOLD ME!

...

WHY SHOULD I BELIEVE IT?

MYTHS DON'T SPEAK OF REALITY, ARKADI, SON OF THE DAWN, SON OF THE BEAR...

THEY SPEAK THE TRUTH--THE TRUTH FROM THE DEPTHS.

THEY ARE OUR BLOOD AND OUR SAP... THEY ARE MY NOURISHMENT, THE VERY SUBSTANCE FROM WHICH I WEAVE THE "DREAMS."

...I HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO BELIEVE YOU, OR-PHE.

YOU CARRY THE LUZ ON YOUR FOREHEAD, AS DID ALBE-MOTHER.

YOU ARE A MAGICIAN, A SEER.

A POET, ARKADI... MERELY A POET.

TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
HNN?
KRO-NO?
29

TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
30

IS SOMEONE OUT THERE?!

PAN-DRA! JONAH!

"O WANDERING FORCE ON MY DOORSTEP..."

"...O MENDICANT ALONG OUR ROADS. FOLLOWING THE WAY OF THE PRODIGAL..."

PAN-DRA? JONAH?

"...WHAT DO YOU SEEK HERE?"

PAN... DRA?!

FOR ALL WE KNOW, THERE COULD BE A DOZEN MORE OF THEM WANDERING THE WORLD. WHAT A NIGHTMARE!

BUT...

ARKADI, YOU ALL RIGHT?

I'LL BE FINE...

I AM HEL'S ENVOY... I'VE COME FOR OR-PHE.

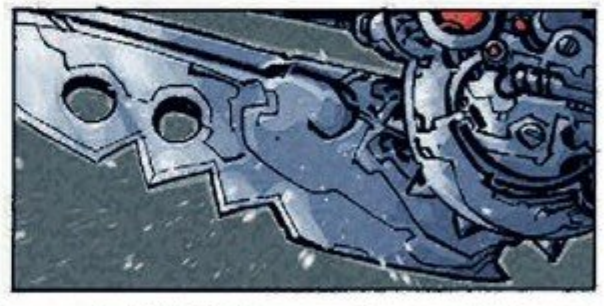
OR-PHE MUST RETURN TO DIS. ... THE CHOSEN NEED OR-PHE'S DREAMS.

COULDN'T HAVE SAID IT BETTER MYSELF! BUT WHO ARE YOU?

I AM HEL'S ENVOY... I'VE COME FOR OR-PHE. OR-PHE MUST RETURN TO DIS. THE CHOSEN NEED...

I'M AFRAID YOU'VE BEEN MISINFORMED, COUSIN! HEL'S ENVOY IS ME, SEE. AND I'M THE ONE WHO WILL BRING HIM BACK TO DIS.

...



H-HNN! SMELL RAD... HNN!

TUM! TUM! TUM!

TUM! TUM! TUM!

I...AM HEL'S ENVOY...
I'VE COME FOR OR-PHE...
OR-PHE MUST RETURN...

FOOLS! YOU MADE ME SKIP A MEASURE.
AND YOU WASTE YOUR TIME, HEL'S ENVOYS: OR-PHE WILL NOT RETURN TO DIS.

TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!

FOR I FEEL GOOD HERE, IN THE PLACE WHERE *TWILIGHT* MEETS THE ANTARC MERIDIAN...

HERE, MY VERMILLION ARMOR NO LONGER REFLECTS THE SKY OR THAT SUN PLACED ON THE HORIZON. HERE, THE COSMIC SCALES HAVE FINALLY STOPPED, REACHING PERFECT EQUILIBRIUM.

IS THAT NOT THE IMAGE OF ETERNITY?

BUT MASTER... WHAT OF YOUR VOYAGES IN SPACE? WHAT OF THE IMAGES FROM OTHER WORLDS? DELTA CENTAURI, AMARANTE, DENEB ENTRYDRE?

—

THE COMETS?

SPACE? ALSO A MYTH. CREATED BY HEL TO HELP *THE CHOSEN* SLEEP IN THEIR CELLS.

HEL KNOWS THAT I HAVE NEVER LEFT OUR WORLD. BUT SHE DOES NOT KNOW THAT ALL THE MATTER OUT OF WHICH I FASHIONED MY DREAMS CAME FROM HERE, *ANTARC CASTLE.*

PAINTING, SCULPTURE, MUSIC, POETRY... ART... THE TREASURE OF THE FORGOTTEN MILLENNIA.

I HAD BUT TO PLUNGE MY HANDS INTO THIS BOTTOMLESS MANNA, ABSORB IT, DIGEST IT, AND RECOMPOSE...SYNTHESIZE IT ALL, PIECE BY PIECE...

AND THE *CHOSEN* OF THE BLUE CITY ATE IT ALL UP, ALONG WITH THEIR NUTRIENT, LIKE A SWEET NEPENTHE.

I LULLED THEM TO SLEEP, AND HEL WAS SATISFIED.

TUM!

TUM!

TUM!

TUM! TUM! TUM! TUM! TUM! TUM! TUM! TUM! TUM! TUM!

AND THEN, AFTER THE DEATH OF THE CLONE--A PATHETIC IMITATION OF U-RI-D-C--I FLED...I WANDERED THROUGH EMPTY SPACE...BEFORE RETURNING HERE, AS I ALWAYS DO, TO *ANTARC CASTLE*, TO STAY HERE--FOREVER.

THESE CABLES, THESE SCREENS, AND THIS CONSOLE HAVE REPLACED MY LUNGS, MY NERVES, MY FLESH...

THEY ARE MY NEW FLESH, MY NEW BODY, IN PURE HARMONY, AT LONG LAST, WITH...*ART*.

I HAVE DESERTED. YES, I, THE PRODIGAL SON, HAVE BETRAYED THE *CHOSEN*. OR-PHE WILL NO LONGER SING FOR THOSE PALE-FACED DWARVES. OR-PHE WILL NO LONGER STRIVE TO CHASE AWAY THE ANXIETY OF ETERNITY FROM THEIR EMPTY BRAINS.

HEL! DIS! THE CHOSEN! I OWE THEM NOTHING, AND ART'S ONLY PURPOSE IS *ART*.

LEAVE. THE BLACK-WIND CONTINUES--AND WILL FOR THE CENTURIES OF CENTURIES TO COME--TO SWEEP THE ASHES OF THE VANISHED PEOPLES AND TO POWER MY DREAM-SCREENS.

GO BACK TO *DIS*, IF YOU CAN. TELL HEL--

ARGH! THAT'S ENOUGH, OR-PHE!

39

QUIT PUTTING ON THE FANCY AIRS OF A PRINCE IN EXILE!

QUIT PLAYING THE PART OF THE MAGNIFICENT CURSED ARTIST, POSING IN HIS IVORY TOWER, AS HAPPY AS A HERMIT, INDIFFERENT TO THE UNWORTHY WORLD BELOW!

I KNOW THAT BENEATH ALL YOUR FALLEN ANGEL ARMOR, THE PAIN IS STILL THERE!

I SEE YOU HERE, A PRISONER OF YOUR MEMORIES AND YOUR GUILT!

...

YOUR PAST FOLLOWS YOU, OR-PHE, LIKE THE TAIL OF A COMET!

BEHIND THOSE EYES OF YOURS, I KNOW IT, U-RI-D-C STILL BURNS! I HEARD YOUR SONG, THAT MUSIC AS COLD AS THE WIND THAT BLOWS THROUGH THE STARS!

...

I SAW YOUR SCREENS...

I SEE THE MORBID PAINTINGS THAT HANG HERE!

"I AM THE BROODING ONE, THE WIDOWER, THE INCONSOLABLE..." IT'S CALLED POUTING! YOU BASK IN YOUR OWN SUFFERING, OR-PHE! YOU WALLOW IN SELF-PITY LIKE AN OLD MAN!

AND BEHOLD HOW BEAUTIFUL! HOW SUBLIME! *"I HAVE LO-OST MY U-RI-D-C, NO PAIN CAN EQUAL MI-INE..."* TURN IT INTO AN OPERA, THAT WE MAY SEE THE STATUES IN YOUR MUSEUM WEEP!

YOUR SO-CALLED FUSION INTO ART FOR ART'S SAKE WITH A CAPITAL A!

...

NONSENSE! YOUR SYNTHETIC-DREAM MACHINE IS YOUR DRUG!

YOU'RE JUST LIKE A CHOSEN ONE STUFFED WITH SEDATIVES! YOU'RE NO BETTER THAN THEY ARE!

ART--HA! WHAT IS ART?!

LIES STOLEN FROM THE GHOSTS OF THE PAST!

WHO ARE YOU, VALKYRIE, FEROCIOUS GIRL, TO KNOW ALL THIS ABOUT ME?

WHO ARE YOU TO TALK TO ME THIS WAY?

ONCE MORE: WHO ARE YOU?

HEL BUILT ME FOR THIS MISSION, YES. AND YES, THE SALVATION OF DIS IS AT STAKE, AS CLAIMED BY THAT..THAT CREATURE THAT RUNS ON A NUKE BATTERY AND WHO HAS FORGOTTEN WHO SHE IS..

BUT AS FOR ME, THERE WAS --IS!-- SOMETHING FAR MORE POWERFUL PUSHING ME TOWARDS YOU..

LOVE.

??

I WAS --I AM!-- U-RI-D-C!

YOUR BRIDE, OR-PHE, YOUR WIFE..YOUR MUSE.

FOOL! HOW DARE YOU? U-RI-D-C IS *DEAD*! DEAD TWICE..ONCE FROM THE COLD, ONCE FROM THE FLAMES! DO YOU THINK I WOULD SING FOR A HAIRY SHE-WOLF BORN IN *THE GREAT EXTERIOR*?

AND YET, WHEN I CAME BACK FROM LIMBO, A VIRGIN ONCE MORE, DREAMING OF ETERNAL SNOW, YOU WERE THE ONE WHO ASKED ME:

"AND DO GREAT WHITE ANGELS WITHOUT WING OR MEMORY WALK IN SILENCE ALONG THE BLUE BANKS UNDER THE ARCHING LILIES.."

"THERE IS ONLY THE COLD.. AND THE HORROR OF BEING A VIRGIN"..THAT'S WHAT THAT..THAT CLONED BODY RESPONDED..

NOBODY COULD KNOW THAT, SAVE..

..U-RI-D-C. YOU?!

WHO ELSE? WHO ELSE WOULD BE THIS MOTIVATED TO BRING YOU BACK TO *DIS*, OTHER THAN U-RI-D-C, WHOSE PERSONA, COMPILED IN HEL'S MEMORIES, HAD FURTHER DEEPENED WITH THIS NEW EXPERIENCE..*DEATH?*

AND NOW, WHO ARE YOU?

NOW..? NOW I AM..

OR-PHE, O, OR-PHE! IN DIS, WE LIVE IN AN ARTIFICIAL PARADISE.. I LIVE ON *EARTH* NOW, AND *THIS BODY*..

THIS VIOLENT BODY HAS WILD DESIRES, WHICH MAKE U-RI-D-C NOT QUITE *YOUR* U-RI-D-C ANY MORE, TRUE.

42.

I AM PAN-DRA!

THIS BODY HAS FORGED MY SOUL ANEW, AND FOR THE BETTER!

BECAUSE, UNLIKE THAT WEAK LITTLE U-RI-D-C...

...PAN-DRA CAN TEAR YOU AWAY FROM YOUR DAMN CONSOLE!

NOOO!!

WE'VE WASTED ENOUGH TIME TALKING!

I HAVE A MISSION TO FINISH, MASS DAMMIT!

I WILL BRING BACK OR-PHE EVEN IF IT MEANS CARRYING HIM FOR 10,000 KMETS!

NO! OR-PHE HAS THE RIGHT TO STAY HERE! IT'S NICE HERE, I AGREE!

I WANT TO STAY WITH HIM! I WAS BORN TO SERVE HIM, CARE FOR HIM...

YOU THINK YOU...

...PROTECT HIM!

...CAN STOP M...?!

BANG!

43

THAT'S ART.

TURNING LEAD INTO GOLD.

TUM! TUM!

TUM! TUM! TUM!

TUM! TUM!

CREATURES FROM SHEOL! GOLEM-ANTS, MANY-MANY!

THEY- COMING!

FEET OF LEAD... IT'S LEGION!

WHAT IS IT?

BY THE MASS!

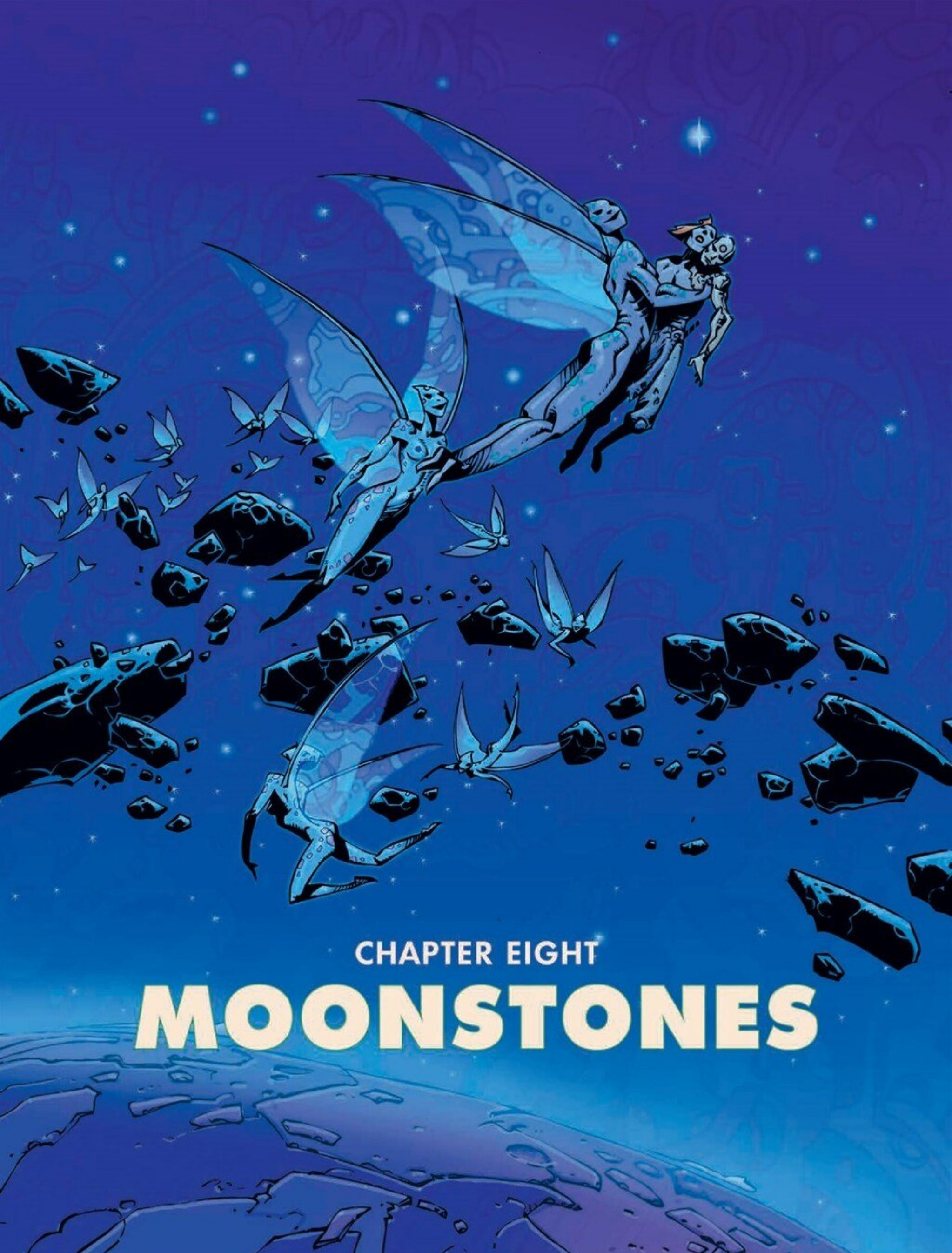
RAD!

HNN! I SMELL RAD!

TUM! TUM! TUM! TUM!

HELP RADON!

TUM!
TUM!
TUM!


CHAPTER EIGHT
MOONSTONES

JONAH! GRAB THE GUN!

FIRE!

"FLOW MY TEARS, FALL FROM YOUR SPRINGS."

TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!
TUM!

BANG!

KRAAK!

NOT AT THEM, THERE'RE TOO MANY! BLOCK THEM!

GOT IT!

KRAAK!

BANG! BANG!

"EXILED FOREVER, LET ME MOURN..."

KRAAK!

KRAAAAAK!

FIGHT THEM, ARKADI! THEY'RE SLOW!

THEIR ONLY ADVANTAGE IS THEIR WEIGHT!

AND THEIR NUMBERS, NO?

I AM...

I AM HEL'S ENVOY!

"HERE, WHERE THE BLACK BIRD OF NIGHT SINGS HER SURVIVING SHAME..."

LIKE IT OR NOT, WE'RE OUTTA HERE, OR-PHE!

HEY! YOU'RE HURTING HIM!

IF YOU WANT TO LIVE, BLUE BUTT, SHUT UP AND HELP ME!

"THERE LET ME LIVE..."

AND OR-PHE! ENOUGH WITH THE DAMN MUSIC! WE'RE SICK OF IT!

NO! NOT THAT!

PAN-DRA! WE'RE NOT GONNA MAKE IT! MOVE YOUR ASS!

HEY! SHOW A LITTLE RESPECT, KID! I'M PRACTI-CALLY YOUR FATHER!

"...FORLORN..."

YOU KILLED OR-PHE!
WHO GIVES A SHIT ABOUT THE HARDWARE?
HIS BRAIN IS STILL IN HERE, RIGHT?
LET'S MOVE!

PAN... UM...

OR-PHE...

OR-PHE MUST RETURN TO DIS!

THE EXIT IS BLOCKED!

NO! THIS WAY!

UP THERE!

I HOPE YOU KNOW WHERE YOU'RE TAKING US, ARK-ADI!

QUICK!

JONAH! GET THE GUN!

KRAAAAK!

BANG!

LET'S GO, UM... ENVOY?

PAN-DRA TWO! COME ON!

"HEL'S ENVOY... YOUR... 'SISTER,' PAN-DRA... SHE STAYED BEHIND!"

"I THINK SHE'S THE ONE THEY WANTED, ACTUALLY. DUE TO HER NUKE BATTERY."

"THE MARK OF RAD-HNNN!"

UNLESS IT WAS ME THEY WERE AFTER...

WE'RE LEAVING TWILIGHT.

AND HEADING TOWARDS THE SUN... OPPOSITE OF DIS!

I KNOW WHAT I'M DOING.

HOW? DID YOU SWALLOW A COMPASS?

NO! I USED TO OBSERVE THE SUCKERS WHEN I WAS A KID.

"AND LATER AN ANGEL,
SETTING THE DOORS AJAR,
FAITHFUL AND JOYOUS,
WILL COME TO REVIVE THE
TARNISHED MIRRORS,
THE EXTINGUISHED FLAMES."

ALONG THE ANTARC MERIDIAN. TOWARDS THE DAY POLE. DAY 1.

10° OMEGA ZONE.

KERGUELEN DEATH-DEPTHS.

"IN THE VILLAGE OF ACCAIA, OLD MAN LAIOS HAD ONCE MARKED A MALE, JUST FOR FUN— A SUCKER THAT HAD STOPPED THERE AND ESCAPED THE APPETITE OF HIS FEMALE.

"HE RETURNED MANY CYCLES LATER, PERHAPS AFTER FLYING AROUND THE GLOBE..."

MORE LIKE "AROUND THE SKY," IF YOU ASK ME!

"BASED ON THE NOTIONS OF CLIMATOLOGY I ABSORBED IN HEL'S MEMORIES BEFORE I LEFT DIS, IT WOULD SEEM THAT NEAR THE DAY POLE, THE AIR MASSES RISE TO HIGHER ALTITUDES AND THEN SPREAD OUT HORIZONTALLY."

"YES, I READ ABOUT THAT, TOO, IN PAN-DRA'S 'BOX.'"

AT HIGHER ALTITUDES, THE HIGH-WINDS BLOW TOWARDS *TWILIGHT*, I.E. TOWARDS *NIGHT*. THEY WILL TAKE US BACK TOWARDS DIS!

ALONG THE *ANTARC* MERIDIAN. DAY 1.

40° OMEGA ZONE.

WHARTON TRENCH.

"HOW IS ORPHE'S BRAIN?"

I'VE SEALED IT. HIS NUTRITIONAL FLUID IS CONTAINED.
—
HE'S HOLDING ON, BUT FOR HOW MUCH LONGER?

YES... HOW MUCH LONGER?

DAY 3. 80° OMEGA ZONE. CHOTT BENGLAH. HIMMALAH RANGE.

DAY 4. BEYOND THE HIMMALAHS, UNDER THE ZENITH OF THE WORLD. AT 90°.

THIS IS IT! I'M SURE OF IT!

KAI-LA-SA! MOUNT KELAS! THE SHIVA LINGA! SOURCE OF THE URD! INEXTINGUISHABLE FIRE! HUNGRY MOLOCH. -HEL, MOTHER OF THE CHOSEN, PROTECT US!

THE DAY POLE...

THE OMEGA!

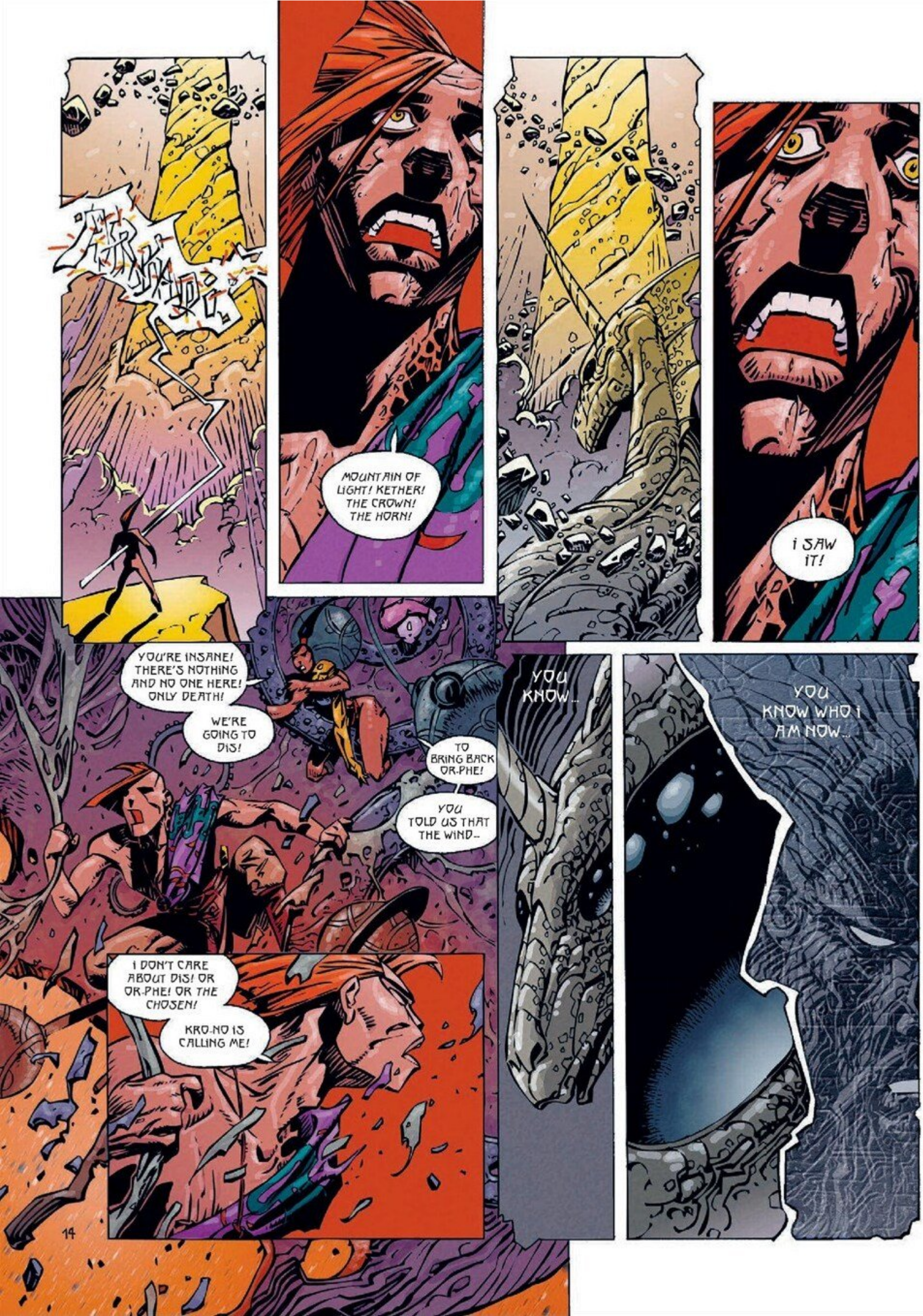
MADNESS! WE'LL ALL BURN!

ROPE YOURSELF IN, JONAH!

I'VE GOT OR-PHE!

KRO-NO! I SAW IT! THIS IS IT!

THIS IS WHERE HE SPOKE TO ME! WHERE HE TOUCHED MY HEART!


MOUNTAIN OF LIGHT! KETHER! THE CROWN! THE HORN!
I SAW IT!
YOU'RE INSANE! THERE'S NOTHING AND NO ONE HERE! ONLY DEATH!
WE'RE GOING TO DIS!
TO BRING BACK OR-PHE!
YOU TOLD US THAT THE WIND--
I DON'T CARE ABOUT DIS! OR OR-PHE! OR THE CHOSEN!
KRO-NO IS CALLING ME!
YOU KNOW...
YOU KNOW WHO I AM NOW...

I AM THE ONE WHO SLEEPS AT THE HEART OF THE WORLD...

THE PRISONER OF TIME...

I AWAIT YOU.

KRO-NOOOO!

THE KID'S LOST HIS MIND! HE'S GOING--

TAKE CARE OF OR-PHE, JONAH!

CALM DOWN, KID!

KRO-NO IS WAITING FOR ME! HE'S HERE!

I MUST_

ORGANIC, NHHH!

NHHH!

NHHH!

NO!

NO LIBERATE KRO-NO!

CANCELED!

DEFEND THE MASS...

KRO-NO SLEEP PARADOXICAL...

KRO-NO DREAM...

PRIORITY PROGRAM

DANGER!

OPTIMIZE PROGRAM!

OVERRIDE!

WHO'S SPEAKING?!

MY NAME iS LEGiON!

LEGiON...

LEGiON...

GIVE UP!

DON'T LISTEN TO HIM, ARKADI! iT'S LEGiON. HE WHO STANDS IN THE WAY.

NOOOO!

HNNN...

THE MONSTER'S GOING TO KILL HIM!

THAT TUMOR...

I NEVER COULD STAND IT!

NOO!

NHHH...!

THE SHADOW'S VOICE...

...IS...

...GONE.

KRO-NO?

ENTER, ARKADi...

ENTER THE TEMPLE OF DREAMS...

WHERE?

SOMEWHERE ABOVE THE STORMS...

iN THE iMAGES i STEAL FROM OR-PHE, THE ELECTRiC POET WITH A TONGUE ENGRAVED WiTH BiNARY RUNE...

"DEUS EX MACHiNA"...

ARE YOU ALSO...

_A MACHiNE-GOD...?

THE SLEEPING GOD OF WHOM MY MOTHER SPOKE...?

...A BROKEN "MACHiNE GOD," YES...

FOSSiLiZED, TRAPPED iN A PLACE WITHOUT A DOOR, GUARDED BY LEAD SOLDiERS DEVOiD OF SOULS OR MEMORiES...

PRiSONER OF THE MASS.

THE MASS?! OR-PHE SAID THAT...

OR-PHE SPEAKS THE LANGUAGE OF MYTH, BUT *THE MASS* IS INDEED WHAT HE SHOWED YOU! RAD'S EXCREMENT!

IT IS THE SLOW DEATH OF THE WORLD, A POISON THAT FLOWS AND SEEPS IN EVER FURTHER, EVER DEEPER...

AND DEVOURS! A CANCER ON THE HEART OF THE WORLD!

LIBERA ME!

WHY ME? I AM BUT A SIMPLE...

YOU KNOW NOT WHAT YOU ARE!

YOU ARE THE HERO, THE WARRIOR ENTRUSTED WITH MY DELIVERANCE!

I...

REMEMBER! YOU GUESSED AS MUCH, IN THE CASTLE: FROM THE DEPTHS, I HEARD OR-PHE'S SAD SONGS, THE LEGEND OF THE WARRIOR WITH THE SHATTERED FOREHEAD...!

ARKAS... MY FATHER...

I TRIED TO SHOW HIM THE WAY...

BUT ARKAS FAILED...!

PERHAPS, IN THE END, HE WAS BUT A MYTH THAT ORPHEE DREAMED...

FROM THE DEPTHS, I CONTINUED TO PROBE THE HAPPENSTANCE WOVEN BY SYNCHRONICITY...

AND IT IS YOUR HEART THAT I TOUCHED.

I CHOSE YOU, SON OF A MAD WARRIOR AND A MIDWIFE--A SON OF THE EARTH.

ACCEPT IT.

I ALREADY HAVE.

WHERE IS THE PATH THAT LEADS TO YOU?

YOU HAVE TRAVELED THE RIGHT PATH, THE WAY OF KNOWLEDGE--DAATH--FROM THE HEART OF THE WORLD, ACCAIA, TO ITS NAVEL, ANTARC CASTLE.

AND NOW YOU HAVE APPROACHED THE CROWN--KETHER--*THE DAY POLE*--THE OMEGA. AND LIKELY YOU HAVE PASSED NEAR ME, YES...

AND YET... SUCH IS THE NATURE OF LABYRINTHS: YOU ENTER, AND THE PATH QUICKLY TAKES YOU TO THE CENTER. BUT THEN IT LOOPS AROUND AND TAKES YOU BACK TO THE PERIPHERY.

AND YOU MUST KEEP GOING, TAKE THE LONG WAY, AND TRAVERSE MOURNING AND METAMORPHOSIS.

NOW, YOU MUST REACH THE OTHER END OF THE WORLD, THE FOUNDATION--YESOD, *THE NIGHT POLE*--THE ALPHA, WHERE IT ALL BEGAN.

BUT... SAVING DIS... PAN-DRA'S MISSION...OR-PHE... THAT'S NOT MY QUEST!

ALL I WANT IS TO GET RID OF MY NIGHTMARES ABOUT LEGION...BE FREE FROM HIS VOICE, AND YOURS...

LIBERA ME!

SET ME FREE, AND YOU WILL BE FREED!

AND MUCH MORE: YOU WILL FREE... THE WHOLE WORLD!

THE WHOLE WORLD?!

IT'S A GHASTLY MASH-UP...

IT'S ALL CONNECTED, ARKADI.

THE PATH THAT LEADS TO ME PASSES THROUGH DIS...BY THE WELL OF DEAD MEMORIES...

IT IS THE ONLY PATH.

AND I NEED OR-PHE, TOO.

IT'S ALL CONNECTED...

FOLLOW THE GOLD...

THE GOLD...

...BUT IT WAS THE ONLY SOLUTION.

RAAH!

IT DOESN'T LOOK PRETTY, I KNOW. BUT I DIDN'T HAVE MUCH CHOICE.

I CONNECTED YOUR CIRCULATORY SYSTEM TO OR-PHE'S. THE BIO-DOCS WOULD'VE DONE A BETTER JOB, BUT...

WELL, LET'S JUST HOPE IT HOLDS!

WHAT ABOUT... "SHADOW"?!

HE WAS ABOUT TO KILL YOU, ARKADI.

I HAD... TO GET RID OF HIM.

GET RID OF HIM?! BUT HE WAS MY BROTHER! HE WAS A PART OF ME!

AND NOW, THIS... I...

THIS *THING!*

HOW CAN YOU ATTACH SOMETHING INERT TO SOMETHING LIVING?

OR-PHE IS HUMAN, ARKADI! HIS BRAIN IS *ALIVE!*

AS ALIVE AS A WAD OF SPIT IN A JAR!

YOU'VE CREATED A MONSTROSITY!

HOW DARE YOU SPEAK OF MONSTERS, SON OF THE GREAT EXTERIOR, REFUSE OF RAD?!

OR-PHE WAS DYING! HE NEEDED BLOOD! VITAL FLUIDS! THINK OF DIS AND THE CHOSEN! THEY'RE WAITING FOR HIM!

DAMN THE CHOSEN, HEL, AND ALL YOUR MACHINE-GODS!

"I WANT... I...

"OH! IT CAN'T BE!

"I'M...

"...DEAD!"

"WE ARE ALL..."

...DEAD!

HMM... I DON'T THINK SO.

WE'RE IN THE TROPOSPHERE, ACTUALLY, ON THE RING-MOON...

AT THE APEX OF *THE DAY POLE*, THE PEAK OF OUR ASCENT, WE... REVERSED COURSE...

NOW WE CAN JUST LET THE MOONSTONES CARRY US.

YOU WERE RIGHT. WE'RE HEADING TOWARDS *NIGHT!*

WHAT... WHAT ARE THOSE? TRANSMIGRATING SOULS? ANGELS?

I DON'T KNOW.

THEY'RE...CREATURES THAT CAUGHT US MID-FLIGHT AND PUT US DOWN HERE...

"I HAVE SEEN SIDEREAL ARCHIPELAGOS! AND ISLANDS...

"...WHOSE DELIRIOUS SKIES ARE OPEN TO THE SEA-WANDERER."

OR-PHE IS ALIVE!

"O MILKY WAY, SISTER IN WHITENESS TO CANAAN'S RIVERS AND THE BRIGHT BODIES OF...

"...LOVERS DROWNED, CAN WE FOLLOW TOILSOMELY YOUR PATH TO OTHER NEBULAE?"

STOP IT!

HE'S RUNNING ON A LOOP. HE'S DREAMING... COMPILING HIS MEMORY. GIVE HIM TIME, ARKADI!

I'LL TRY LOWERING THE VOLUME OF THE VOCODER.

"O TIME, STAND STILL AND YOU, HOURS, PROPITIOUS HOURS

"...STOP PASSING...

"UNDER THE MIRABEAU BRIDGE FLOWS THE SEINE...

"...AND OUR LOVES...

"WHY MUST I BE REMINDED AGAIN...

"LET NIGHT COME, LET THE HOUR STRIKE.

"LET NIGHT COME...

"MAN HAS NO PORT, TIME HAS NO SHORE...

"IT FLOWS AND WE PASS BY...

"SNOW, WITH ITS RIPPLING FOLDS, CONSTRICTS THE FROZEN OCEANS LIKE A STIFF SHROUD.

"THE FACE OF EARTH IS ABSOLUTELY BARE.

"NEITHER CHIMING FORESTS, NOR WIND-BATTERED SEAS."

OR-PHE AND HIS POEMS... JONAH AND PAN-DRA DON'T SEE IT...

THEY CAN'T SEE THE DYING WORLD...

"THE DYING SUN LOOKS AND SEES NOTHING.

"WHY DO YOU DELAY? THE EARTH IS DRIED UP AND DEAD..."

THEY'RE BLINDED BY THEIR MISSION. BY THEIR FEELINGS AND THEIR RESENTMENT.

"THE GLOBES THAT FELL FROM YOUR GOLDEN BELT FLY, SCATTERED DUST CARRIED BY THE WIND."

OR-PHE... HEARS YOU.

I CAN FEEL YOUR HEART BEAT...

YES...

"VENENA PELLO: I PURSUE POISONS"...THUS SPEAKS THE UNICORN WITH THE VERMILION FOREHEAD, THE MERCURIAL SPIRIT WHO SHOWS THE WAY TOWARDS AWAKENING--GOLD.

YOUR CABEIRI... THE SHADOW THAT WEIGHED UPON YOU AND HELD YOU BACK...

THE SHADOW IS GONE.

AND NOW... SOMETHING GROWS INSIDE ME. SOMETHING BRIGHT.

IT IS MUSIC, ARKADI. JUST MUSIC. IT FLOWS THROUGH YOUR VEINS NOW.

YOUR SONG, ORPHE... GIVE ME TIME TO GET USED TO IT...

IN THE VILLAGE OF ACCAIA, THERE WAS NO MUSIC...

NO BLUENESS TO THE SKY...

NO...

!

ARKADI BETTER NOW--HMM?

RA-RADON?!

YOU HOLD ON ME, ARK-ADI--HNN!

"THE AIR IS NOTHING BUT RAYS, SO SOWN IS IT WITH ANGELS."

THEY ARE PSELLS.. HNN.

CHILDREN OF THE RING-MOON.

AND ME.. RADON COMPLETE NOW.. FINISHED!

YOU'RE RADIANT, RADON!

AND PLEASE THANK YOUR FRIENDS. THEY SAVED US!

PSELLS PRETTY AND NICE--HNN! NOT MUCH MENTAL-MEMORY.. BUT PRETTY-PRETTY!

AND KNOW MOON-FOOD-HNNN!

SNAILS! MOON-FOOD! GOOD!

"I WILL SING OF NIGHT, DAUGHTER OF CHAOS...

"MOTHER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, MOTHER OF DREAM AND DEATH, OF TENDERNESS, LIES, AND DARK ANGUISH.

"NIGHT, WHERE ALL THINGS BEGIN...

"AND I SHALL CALL HER GODDESS."

MOON-STONE...

SHADOW...?

THE WINDS...

EVERYTHING FALLS BACK HERE, IN THE HEART OF NIGHT.

FAREWELL, ARKADI, JONAH FUNNY--HNN! PAN-DRA GREAT BEAUTY...

RADON PSELL TOO NOW... RADON GO BACK UP THERE-- HNN...

YOU TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, RADON!

WE'LL MISS YOU.

FAREWELL, ALL!

FAREWELL, MONSTER OF THE GREAT EXTERIOR...

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NOW WHAT?

I CAN'T FEEL THE COLD, OR-PHE!

MY AURA PROTECTS YOU...

NOW... WE ENTER DIS!

HOME, SWEET HOME!

ENTER...?

BEYOND THE MIRROR...

YOUR ARM, POET! GUIDE US!

IT'S YOUR ARM, ARKADI!

AS FOR ME...

...I AM BUT THE NARRATOR OF LEGENDS. THE VOICE OFF-SCREEN.

AND YOUR FATHER AR-KAS ENTERED HERE, YOU SAID, WITHOUT A GUIDE.

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BUT HE HAD ALBE'S LUZ.

"PER ME SI VA NELLA CITTA DOLENTE...

"PER ME SI VA NELL'ETERNO DOLORE..."

DANTE'S DIVINE COMEDY...

INFERNO CANTO III.

SHUT UP, JONAH!

"THE CITY DRAWETH NEAR WHOSE NAME IS DIS, WITH THE GRAVE CITIZENS, WITH THE GREAT THRONG..."

INFERNO, CANTO X.

DIS. YEAR 10043 OF *THE STILL ERA.*

I TOLD YOU...

SHEOL!

"MY ONLY STAR IS DEAD AND MY CONSTELLATED LUTE BEARS THE BLACK SUN OF MELANCHOLIA."

PRO-ME NEVER RETURNED ...!

EVERYBODY HERE IS DEAD!

HOW HORRIFIC!

ANYONE THERE?!

HEL?!

HEL?!

HEL?!

HEL?!

IT TOOK ME TOO LONG TO BRING OR-PHE BACK!

I HAVE FAILED!

PAN-DRA, NO! MAYBE IT'S...

WHAT THE...

"PAST THE BRIDGE, PHANTOMS CAME TO MEET HIM.

"AND BATS WITH BABY FACES IN THE VIOLET LIGHT WHISTLED, AND BEAT THEIR WINGS AND CRAWLED HEAD DOWNWARD DOWN A BLACKENED WALL.

"AND UPSIDE DOWN IN THE AIR WERE TOWERS TOLLING REMINISCENT BELLS, THAT KEPT THE HOURS."

THE CHOSEN! THEY MUST BE RESTING IN THE HALF-LIFE CRYPTS!

THEY'RE DREAMING!

THESE HOLOGRAMS ARE *DREAMS?!*

YES! NIGHTMARES! THE KIND DEAD BODIES HAVE!

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THIS IS THE LOGICAL RESULT OF THE POLITICAL THINKING BEHIND THE CREATION OF DIS...

A NECROPOLIS FOR SLEEPWALKING GHOSTS!

LIMBO. DIS WAS ALWAYS LIMBO. EVEN BEFORE...

MY MOTHER TOLD ME ABOUT THIS... THE MYTHICAL PLACE OF THE MANES, THE CIT- OF- NO-RETURN...

"AND VOICES SINGING OUT OF EMPTY CISTERNS AND EXHAUSTED WELLS.

LET'S GO DOWN!

"THAT EMPEROR WHO SWAYS THE REALM OF SORROW, AT MID BREAST FROM TH'ICE STOOD FORTH.

"I SAW SHADOWS RISE UP IN THE GLACIER...THEIR MOUTHS COLD, THEIR EYES IN PAIN."

THE NINTH CIRCLE.

GREETINGS, OM-6, SERVANT OF OR-PHE.

HE-FAS-TUS, THE TITAN METAL-WORKER!

YOU'RE ALIVE!

AND... OR-PHE?!

OR WHAT'S LEFT OF YOU...

AND PAN-DRA! I SEEM TO RECALL MAKING ARMOR FOR YOU...

SO MUCH FOR HONORING MY WORK!

WE'VE WAITED FOR YOU A LONG TIME, BROTHER... TOO LONG.

LET US IN, HE-FAS-TUS! I NO LONGER BEAR THE SEAL OF HEL AND I'M EXPECTED.

I GENERALLY PREFER BUILDING THINGS.

THAT SAID...

...DESTROYING THEM CAN BE FUN AS WELL.

BE CAREFUL, OR-PHE. SHE'S ARMED.

IT'S JUST A COMPUTER...

"THE QUEEN WELCOMES YOU: MAKE HASTE, FOLLOW HER INTO HER CASTLE MADE OF FROST AND MOON WINDOWS."

COME IN...

ENTER HEAVEN'S BOUDOIR...

"SHE IS THE QUEEN OF HEARTS. IF SHE SO PLEASES, SHE WILL SECRETLY TAKE YOU TOWARDS STRANGE PLACES..."

...THE BOUDOIR OF THE GORGON.

ILLUSION!

"...WHERE DOORS, ROOMS, OR TOWERS ARE NO MORE, WHERE DEAD MAIDENS COME TO SPEAK OF LOVE..."

HEL!

OR-PHE?!

THE PRODIGAL CHILD HAS RETURNED...

COME, LET ME EMBRACE YOU, FAVORITE SON OF MINE...

...THAT I MAY CRUSH YOU, SUFFOCATE YOU...

...THAT I MAY NURSE YOU WITH SWEET NEPENTHES, THE LONGEVITY ELIXIR. THE MAGIC CORDIAL THAT DISSIPATES ALL PAIN...

REMEMBER!

I KNOW THEE, O MONSTER! HERE WE ARE AGAIN, FACE TO FACE. TO RESUME OUR OLD DEBATE WHERE WE LEFT OFF.

YOUR MILK IS A CARNIVOROUS FLOWER, O MOTHER OF STERILITY...

HA! HA! HA!

WHAT IS YOUR NAME, MY CHILD?

DR. DODGSON, I PRESUME...

POET, TAKE YOUR LUTE AND GIVE US A KISS...

...A SIREN-QUEEN WHO DIGESTS YOUR CHOSEN IN THE FROZEN CAVE OF YOUR VAMPIRE BELLY...

SHE'S...

SHE'S BAT-SHIT CRAZY!

WHO SPEAKS?

AND WHO ARE THESE?!

"OFF WITH THEIR HEADS!"

SHE'S GOT A BUG. A MAJOR SYSTEM MALFUNCTION!

BUT SHE'S JUST A HOLO-BODY, AN ELECTRIC GHOST.

WE'RE SAFE.

YEAH, I KNOW.

YOU SOOTHED US WITH DREAMS AND KEPT US IN A CHILDLIKE STATE, DARK MOTHER, OUT OF FEAR OF *THE GREAT EXTERIOR*.

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KEEP HER BUSY WHILE I TRY SOMETHING...

YOU'VE BETRAYED ME, UNWORTHY SON. YOU BROKE OUR VOW, TRAITOR TO YOUR FAITH.

YOU'VE OFFENDED YOUR MOTHER, ME, HEL, QUEEN OF THE NIGHT, FOUNTAIN OF WISDOM.

ALL YOU PROTECT IS AN IN-VITRO CITY, A TEST-TUBE CITY...

DON'T BE SURPRISED IF ENTROPY CATCHES UP WITH YOU: IT HAUNTS NON-LIFE, THE MINERAL WORLD.

METAL.

SO YOU DON'T LOVE ME ANYMORE? AFTER ALL I'VE DONE FOR YOU!

I PUT IMAGES OF YOUR BELOVED U-RI-D-C EVERYWHERE...

SO THAT YOU WOULD RETURN...

...AND GET CAUGHT IN MY WEB.

DID YOU NOT SEE THEM?

I'VE MISSED YOU, OR-PHE... AND I, HEL...

...HAVE BEEN REMISS IN MY MOTHERLY DUTIES. MY PROGRAM... I WAS MEANT TO PROTECT THEM AGAINST ALL HARM...

THE CHOSEN... THE CHOSEN...

THE CHOSEN...

AGAINST THE COLD, HUNGER, PAIN, AGAINST THE MONSTERS OF *THE GREAT EXTERIOR, THE GIBBERING FROTH...*

TIC!

TIC!...

TIC!

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..AND AGAINST THE DANGERS OF COPULATION..THE OBSCURITY OF THE WOMB.. THOSE DARK BOXES, THOSE PANDORA BOXES IN WHICH EVIL SERPENTS LURK..

..THE WORST MISTAKES, GEN.. GENETIC HORRORS..

TIC!...

TIC!...

TIC!...

TIC!...

BUT..

MASS DAMMIT!

SOMETHING OR SOMEONE IS TRYING TO..

..GET INSIDE ME!

YOU!

I RECOGNIZE YOU, OM-6, MY TINY LITTLE..CRRR.. SERVANT OF OR-PHE..

YOU STOLE..

YOU..CRRR..ATE FROM THE TREE OF..

..KNOWLEDGE..

YOU'RE OLD..

YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN..CRRR.. RECYCLED..

..LONG AGO..

YOU DON'T EXIST!

TIC!...

TIC!...

TIC!...

TIC!...

TIC!...

TIC!...

TIC!...

TIC!...

YOU LEAD A FROZEN TEMPORAL VESSEL, ENCHANTRESS..

A RAPACIOUS PRISON THAT SAILS THROUGH TIME HOPING EARTH WILL BE REBORN.

BUT SHE IS DYING, AND INSIDE YOUR CITY OF MADNESS NOBODY SEES A THING.

TIC!...

TIC!...

TIC!...

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NEMESIS, VENGEANCE WITH RRED ARRMS, I WILL FOLLOW YOU TO THE EENDS OF THE EARRTH..

..UNTIL THE END OF TIME.

THE ENDDD OF TTTIME..

TIC!...

TIC!...

TIC!...

TIC!...

TIC!...

TIC!...

TIC!...

TIC!...

TIME...

IN THE HEART OF *NIGHT*, TIME DOESN'T EXIST.

ONLY HEL...

...IS HERE TO COUNT... THE HOURS... TIC, TOC...

TIC!...

THIS IS IT...

TAC!

'TWAS BRILLIG, AND THE SLITHY TOVES DID GYRE AND GIMBLE IN THE WABE; ALL MIMSY WERE THE BOROGOVES, AND THE MOME RATHS OUTGRABE.

"BEWARE...CRRRR... THE JABBERWOCK... MY SON...

"OFF WITH...

"...THEIR HEADDDDDDD..."

.....

IT'S OVER.

IS HEL... "DEAD"?

NO. IT'S JUST A RE-SET! I ERASED HER ACTIVE MEMORY. SHE'S BLANK NOW--LIKE A BABY WITH AMNESIA. BUT THE CORE IS INTACT--HER MEMORIES, HER PROGRAM, ETC.

THIS BUYS US SOME TIME AND GIVES US AGENCY.

AFTER, WE'LL HAVE TO RECONFIGURE AND REBOOT EVERYTHING. BUT I'M AFRAID THERE'S NO-BODY LEFT WHO CAN DO THAT... THE ENGINEERS... KRO-NO...?

BROOOOOMMMMMM

BEHOLD! THE SKY IS OPENING!

PRO-ME IS BACK!

CAZA 06

A-TLAN HAS OPENED THE DOME!

THAT CAN ONLY MEAN ONE THING...

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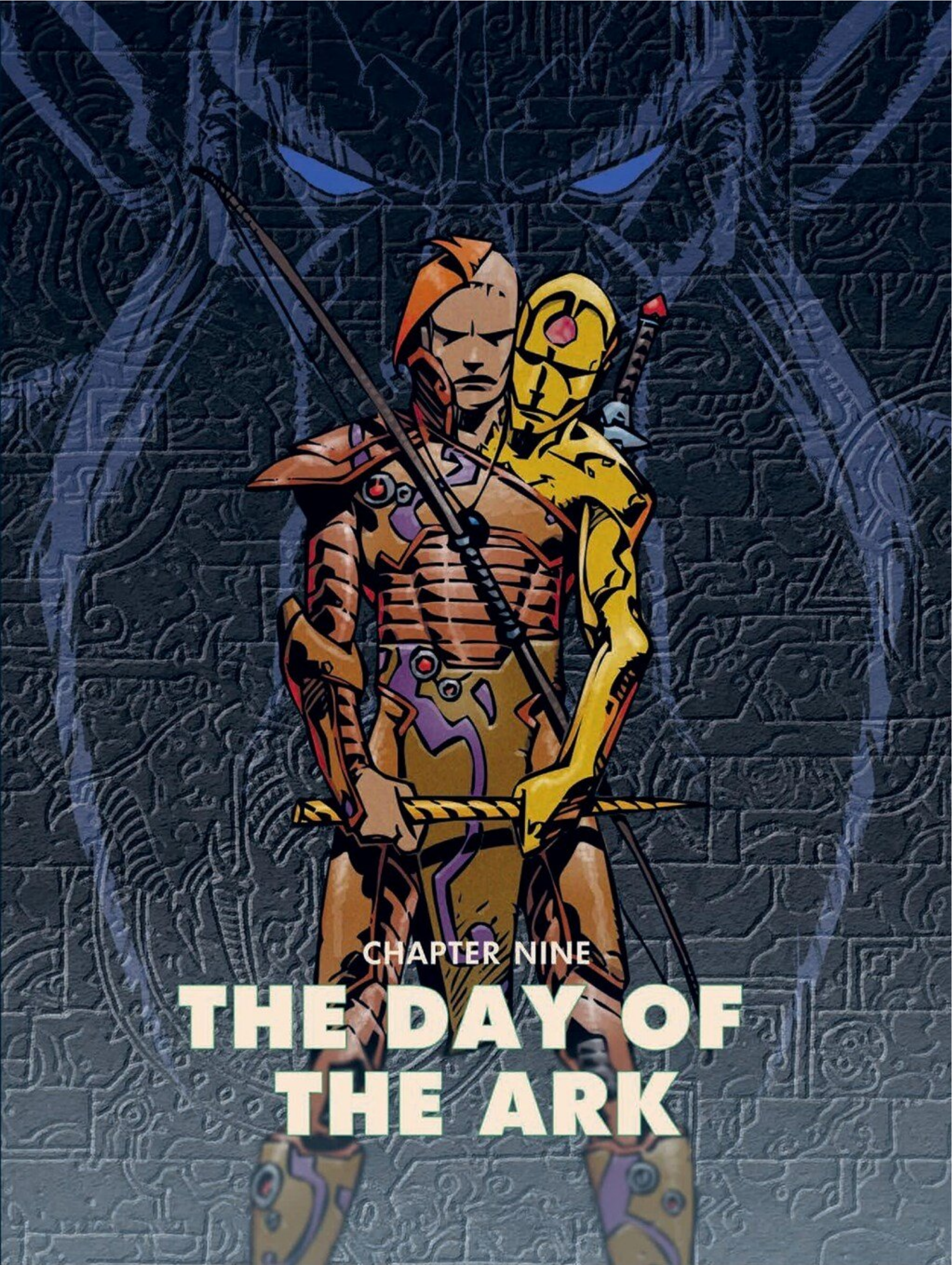
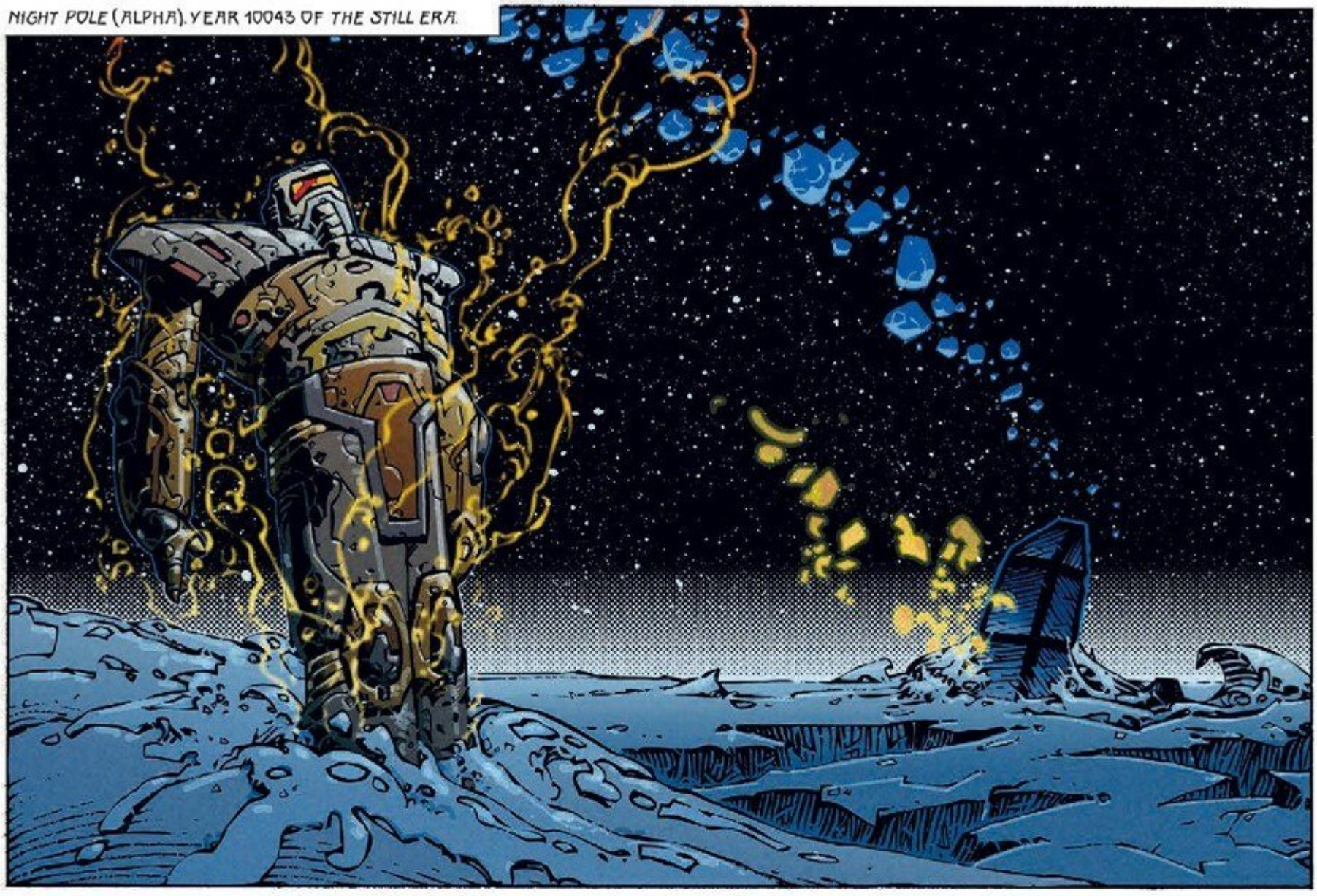


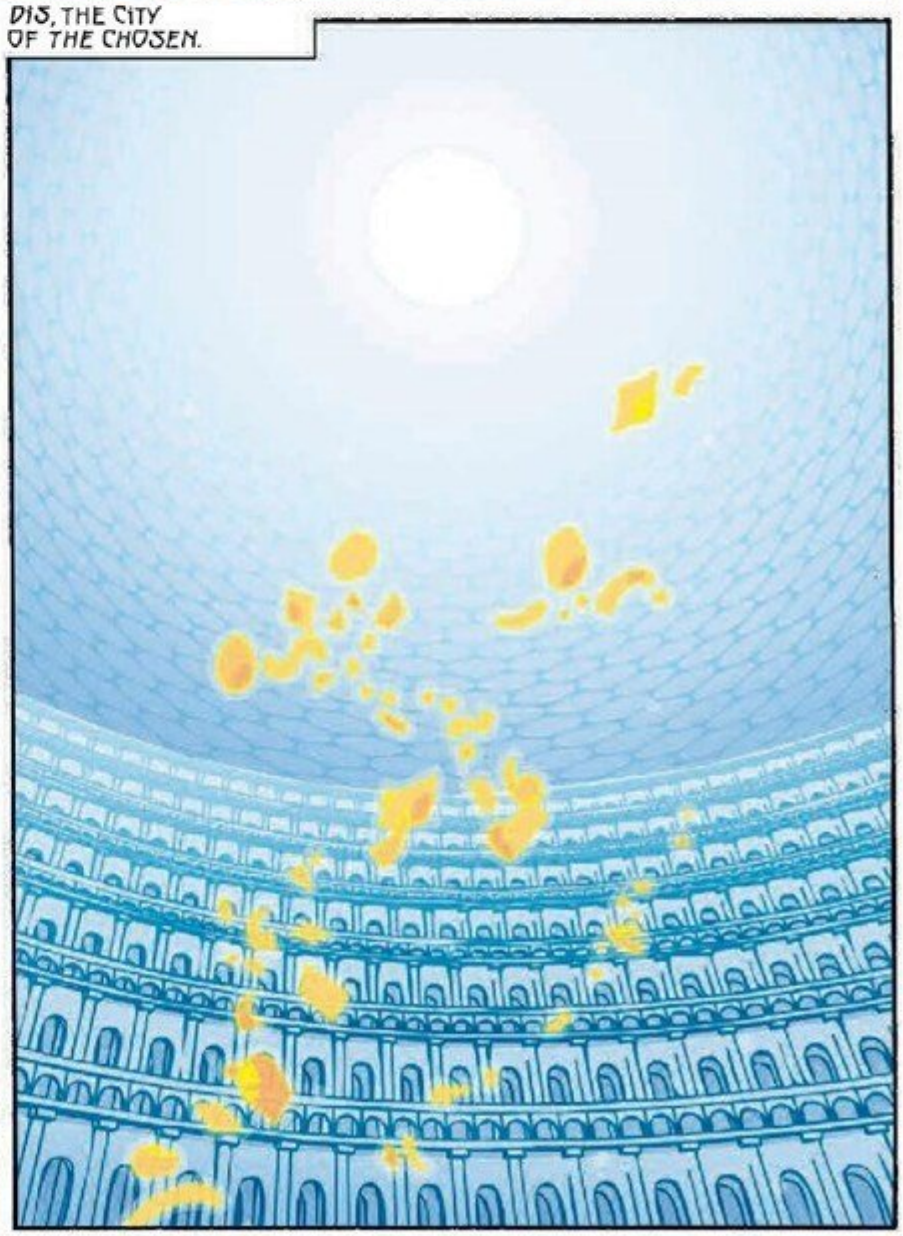
CHAPTER NINE

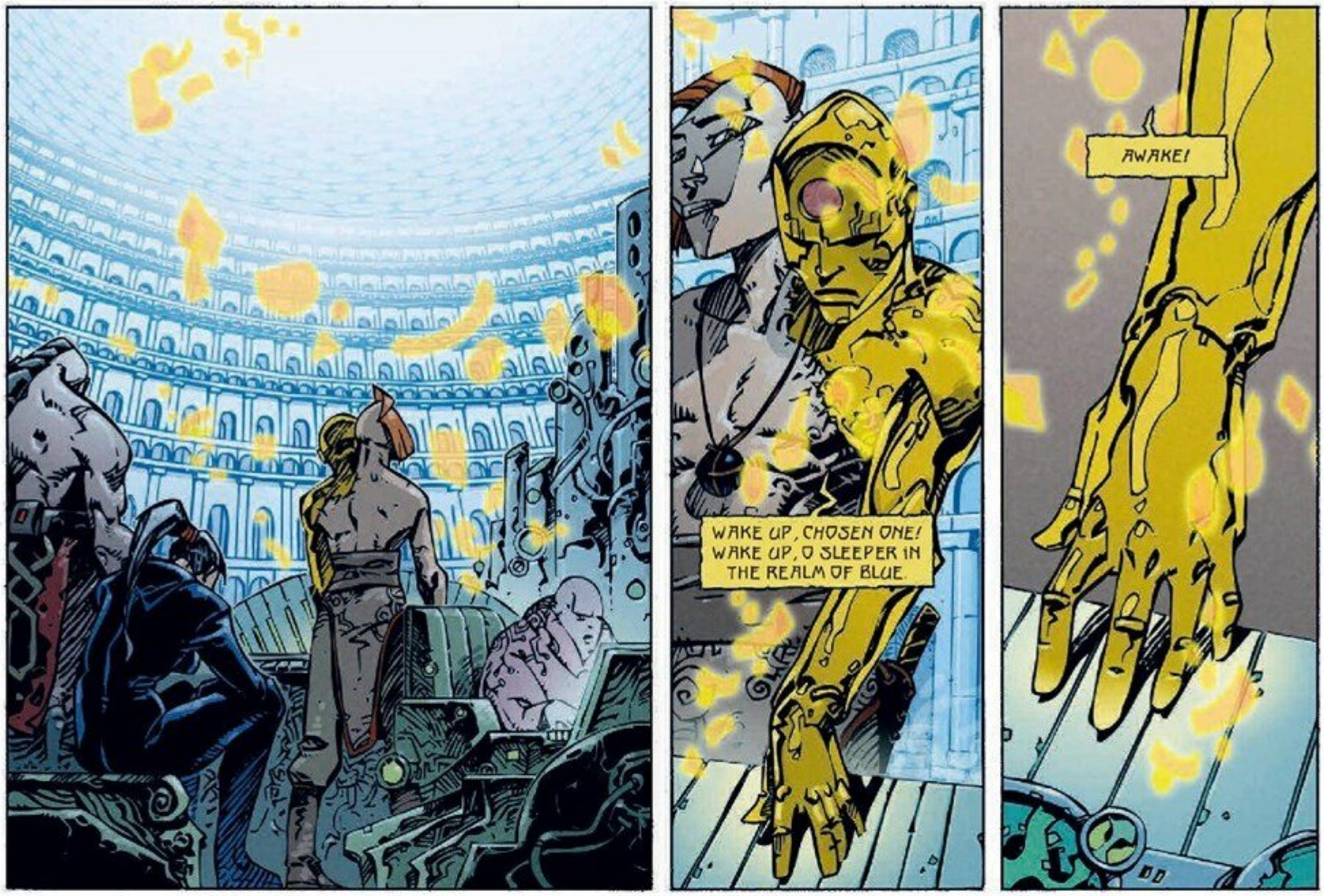
THE DAY OF THE ARK

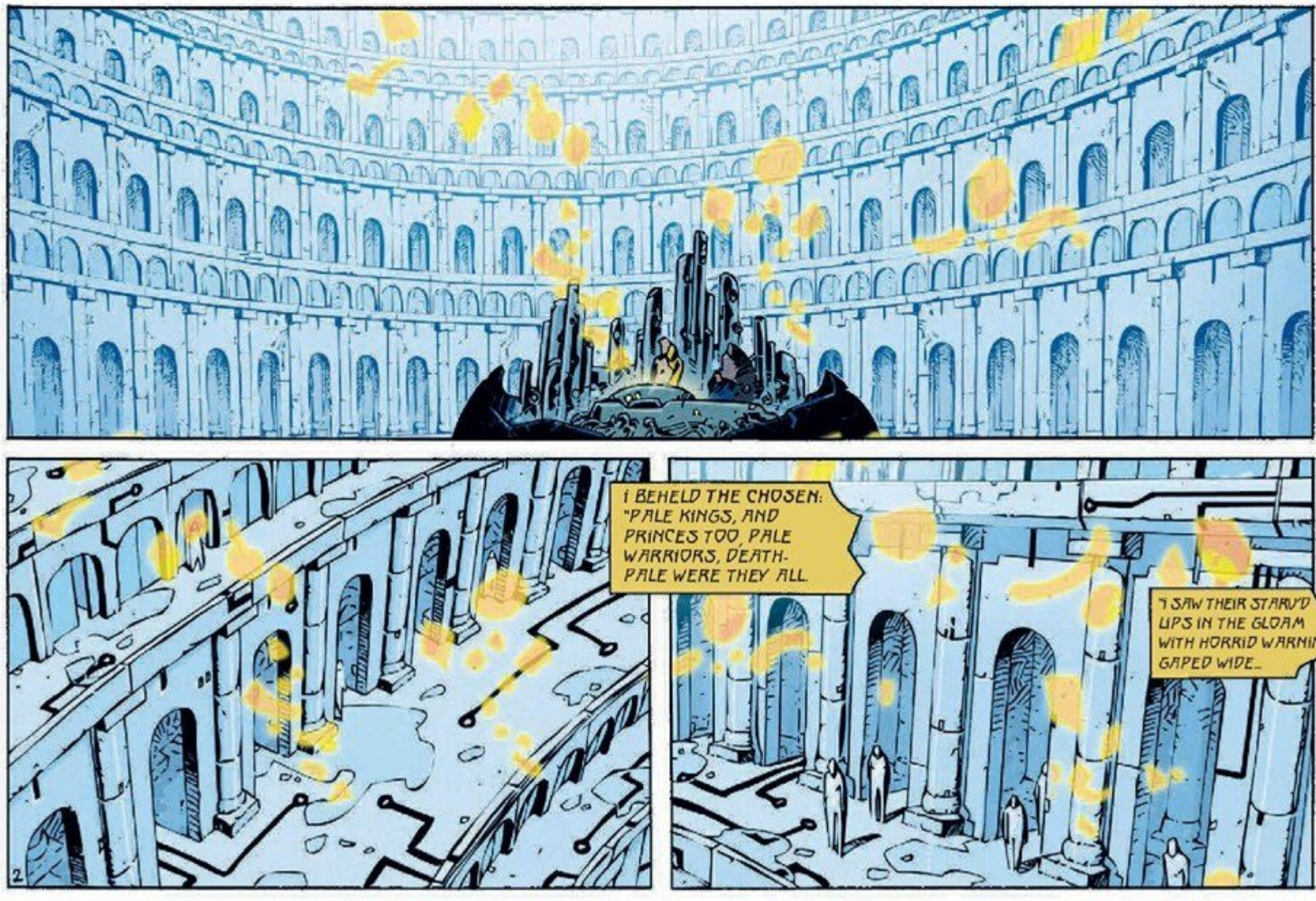
NIGHT POLE (ALPHA). YEAR 10043 OF THE STILL ERA.



DIS, THE CITY OF THE CHOSEN.




WAKE UP, CHOSEN ONE! WAKE UP, O SLEEPER IN THE REALM OF BLUE.
AWAKE!


I BEHELD THE CHOSEN: "PALE KINGS, AND PRINCES TOO, PALE WARRIORS, DEATH-PALE WERE THEY ALL.
"I SAW THEIR STARV'D LIPS IN THE GLOAM WITH HORRID WARNING GAPED WIDE...
2

"...CRY'D--'LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI HATH THEE IN THRALL!"

DREAMS FROM OR-PHE!

WHERE ARE OUR DREAMS?

IMAGES! DREAMS!

GIVE US BACK OUR DREAMS!

SLEEPWALKERS! NOT MUCH DIFFERENT FROM THEIR GHOST HOLOGRAMS...

WHY EVEN BOTHER TO EX-TRACT THEM FROM THEIR HALF-LIFE? WHAT DO WE DO WITH THEM?

I FEAR YOU MIGHT BE RIGHT, ARKADI. BUT GIVE THEM TIME.

"TIME? MORE TIME? WHY?

"THEY ARE LIKE CHILDREN--ORPHANS!

"JUST TO PLUNGE THEM BACK INTO YOUR PRO-GRAMMED DREAMS?

"THEN WHAT? WHAT DO WE EVEN WANT FROM THESE LARVAE?"

THIS IS PRECISELY WHY I WAS BROUGHT BACK HERE, IS IT NOT?

WHAT'S YOUR POINT, ARKADI? THIS IS OUR LIFE AS *THE CHOSEN ONES*. THIS IS DIS... THE PERFECT CITY! IT'S BEEN THIS WAY FOR 10,000 YEARS. IF WE REPROGRAM HEL, IT CAN ALL GO BACK TO NORMAL

NO!

BESIDES, WHO WOULD PROGRAM HER? YOU SAID SO YOURSELF, JONAH--OR OM-6.

THE ENGINEERS ARE DEAD--

KRO-NO SLEEPS--

AND HEL IS DOWN!

NOTHING WILL EVER GO BACK TO "NORMAL" EVER!

JONAH!

CAN YOU GET ME ACCESS TO HEL'S MEMORIES? ALL OF THEM?

ER... NOW I CAN, YES. I'VE DISMANTLED ALL HER SECURITY PROGRAMS.

NOTHING IS LABELED "CONFIDENTIAL" ANYMORE.

ONE MORE THING: TRY TO BRING THE NETWORK BACK ONLINE. CONNECT EVERYTHING YOU CAN, ALL OVER THE WORLD!

BUT I HAVE TO TEND TO OR-PHE! THE BIO-DOCS ARE AWAKE, AND--

OR-PHE-- WHAT'S LEFT OF HIM--CAN WAIT. DO AS HE SAID.

THE CHOSEN ARE AWAKE. I'VE FULFILLED MY DUTY, AND--

OR-PHE! THIS ANDRO... THIS WOMAN... SHE'S DYING!

PAN-DRA! NO!

U-RI-D-C! NO!

DEEP IN THE BOWELS OF DIS LIES A SECRET PLACE CALLED THE WELL OF DEAD MEMORIES.

IT IS THE COLDEST PLACE.

DON'T LEAVE ME...

I'M SO COLD...

I HAVE ROAMED THE WORLD...

...THE NINE CIRCLES OF *DAY*... AND THE NINE CIRCLES OF *NIGHT*...

...YET NEVER HAVE I BEEN THIS COLD...

THIS BODY WAS BUILT AND DESIGNED FOR A SINGLE MISSION: TO BRING BACK OR-PHE.

THE MISSION IS OVER.

IT IS NATURAL FOR THIS BODY TO DIE.

PAN-DRA CANNOT DIE!

FATES! HOW EASILY YOU DOOM HER TO THE VOID!

IT IS QUITE DIFFICULT TO DIE IN *DIS*, AS THE PROGRAM WAS DESIGNED TO MAINTAIN *THE CHOSEN*.

BUT NOT THESE MONSTER-BODIES.

PATIENCE... HEL THOUGHT OF EVERY-THING.

A NEW CLONE HAS BEEN MATURING IN OUR TANKS SINCE YOU FLED, OR-PHE.

IT IS READY.

IT WAITS ONLY TO BE "BROUGHT INTO THE LIGHT." THIS TIME, IN SAFETY.

BODY IN THE DARKNESS...

VEILED... UNVEILED...

U-RI-D-C...

FOR HER TO BE *U-RI-D-C*-- *THE CHOSEN ONE*-- WE MUST IMPLANT IN HER THE "PERSONA" RECORDED SINCE--

NO!

USE PAN-DRA'S PERSONA!

BIO-DOCS! DON'T SETTLE FOR THE DEAD MEMORIES OF THE OLD U-RI-D-C!

COPY THE LIVING SOUL OF PAN-DRA!

ARKADI! WHAT...?!

YES...

ARKADI IS RIGHT...

I WANT TO KEEP MY MEMORIES...

THE GREAT EXTERIOR... TEN YEARS...

AND ALL OF YOU. JONAH, RADON, NOONE...

AND YOU, ARKADI... WHOM PAN-DRA...

...LOVES.

6

MY LIFE..THE SHORT LIFE OF PAN-DRA.. WAS BEAUTIFUL.. ON EARTH.

POUR IT INTO SHE WHO ISN'T BORN.. THIS CLONE..THIS WEAK BODY OF A CHOSEN..

I DON'T WISH TO HAVE TO TEACH HER FROM SCRATCH..

BUT.. HEL WOULD SAY--

THE CENTRAL COMPUTER HAS BEEN RELIEVED OF ITS DUTIES, BIO-DOCS. DID YOU NOT KNOW THIS?!

THIS *HUMAN*, U-RI-D-C-- OR PAN-DRA--HAS SPOKEN! *DO IT.*

PAN-DRA!

U-RI-D-C!

PAN-DRA, YES!

FORGIVE ME, OR-PHE, BUT...I WANT TO KEEP THAT NAME.

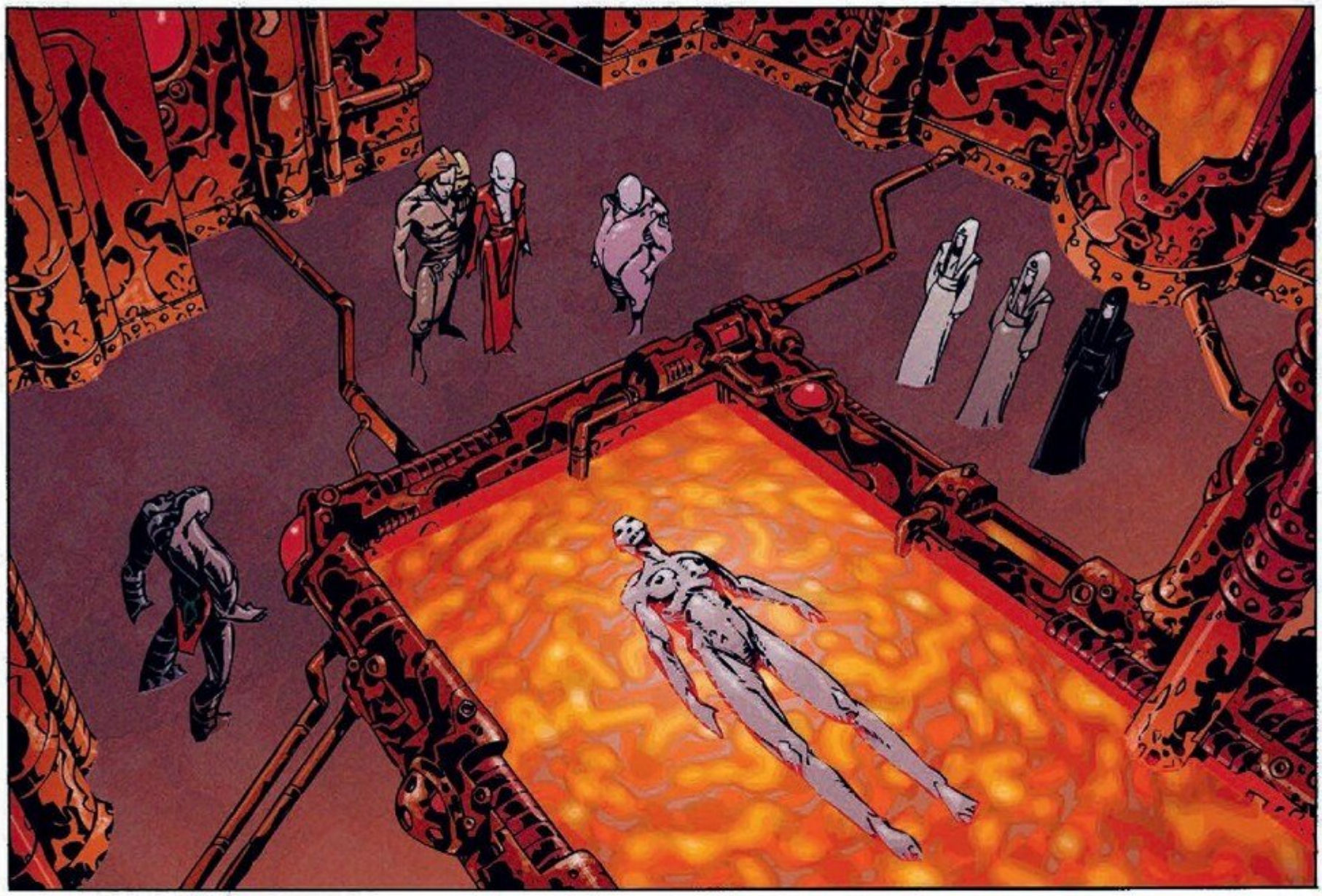
NOW THAT YOU ARE REBORN, NOW THAT I CAN LOOK AT YOU WITHOUT MAKING YOU SUFFER, I HAVE NO LONGER THE FLESH WITH WHICH TO LOVE YOU.

THE BIO-DOCS WILL SEPARATE ME FROM THE YOUNG HUMAN YOU LOVE.

STAY, GOLDEN BROTHER. I NEED YOU STILL...

AND...

KRO-NO NEEDS YOU!



HE-FAS-TUS!

FORGE AN ARMOR FOR ME!

ACCORDING TO ARKADI, THERE ARE MORE BATTLES TO FIGHT.

AND PAN-DRA INTENDS TO JOIN THEM.

ONE OF OR-PHE'S DREAMS...

"YOU ARE A GARDEN LOCKED UP, MY SISTER, MY BRIDE; YOU ARE A SPRING ENCLOSED, A SEALED FOUNTAIN.

"AWAKE, NORTH WIND, AND COME, SOUTH WIND! BLOW ON MY GARDEN, THAT ITS FRAGRANCE MAY SPREAD EVERYWHERE."

HE-FAS-TUS, I'D LIKE AN ARMOR, TOO.

WHY NOT ALL THE CHOSEN, WHILE WE'RE AT IT?

"LET MY BELOVED COME INTO HIS GARDEN AND EAT HIS PLEASANT FRUITS.

"I HAVE COME INTO MY GARDEN, MY SISTER, MY BRIDE; I HAVE GATHERED MY MYRRH WITH MY SPICE."

WE'LL NEED WEAPONS, TOO.

"I HAVE EATEN MY HONEY-COMB WITH MY HONEY. I HAVE DRUNK MY WINE WITH MY MILK."

CAN A DREAM MAKE THE ENTIRE WORLD SHAKE?

"IS IT READY, OM-6?"

"YES, ARKADI. THE NETWORK IS OPEN.

"SPEAK, OR-PHE WILL LEND YOU HIS VOICE."

YOU, THE CHOSEN...

12

YOU, THE CHOSEN..
THE PERFECT "PURE-BLOODS.."
SO SATISFIED.

THE WORLD IS STABLE.
EVERYTHING IS DETERMINED AND ORDERED: *DAY* ON ONE SIDE, *NIGHT* ON THE OTHER.

HERE, INSIDE DIS, IN YOUR PERFECT CITY, YOUR SANCTUARY, YOU LIVE, YOU WAIT, IN A GLASS BOWL. BUT FOR WHAT?

EVERYTHING IS PROGRAMMED. HEL, THE GUARDIAN OF THE GENOTYPE, INCUBATES YOU LIKE FETUSES..

AND STUFFS YOU WITH SEDATIVES.

AND OR-PHE'S "DREAMS"--HYPNOSIS!-- KEEP YOU FROM SEEING THE WORLD.

OUTSIDE--IN THE *GREAT EXTERIOR!*--LURK THE DEGENERATES, THOSE WITH "ROTTED BLOOD," THE MONSTERS..

I AM NOTHING. JUST A YOUNG SAVAGE--A MONSTER, ALMOST--FROM A REMOTE VILLAGE IN MEDITERRA.

THERE, TOO, WE FEARED THOSE FROM BEYOND..

BUT I'VE TRAVELED HALFWAY AROUND THE WORLD WITH PAN-DRA, WHOM YOU ONCE CALLED U-RI-D-C, AND JONAH, WHOM YOU KNOW AS OM-6, AND RADON, WHO MUTATES, AND WHOM YOU COULD NOT POSSIBLY FATHOM.

FROM DEATH-DEPTHS TO *THE GREAT BARRIER* AND MOONSTONE GLACIERS, I HAVE ROAMED THE EARTH AND TOUCHED THE SKY..

I HAVE SEEN, AND I HAVE LEARNED.

AND NOW, ABOUT THE WORLD, I TELL YOU THIS.

THIS EARTH, THIS WORLD THAT IS OURS..

..OR IS IT WE WHO BELONG TO THE WORLD?..

..THIS WORLD..

..IS DYING.

IN FACT, THIS WORLD DIED MORE THAN 10,000 YEARS AGO...

WE'VE TRIED TO BURY THE EXCREMENT OF RAD-- *THE MASS*, THE TUMOR--DEEP INSIDE OUR WORLD'S BODY.

BUT *THE MASS* HAS WEIGHED ON ITS HEART.

THIS WORLD STARTED DYING WHEN IT STOPPED SPINNING.

IT IS JUST AS YOU ARE, IN A STATE OF STASIS, OF HALF-LIFE, NEARLY COMATOSE.

HOW MANY MEN AND BEASTS HAVE SURVIVED?

I KNOW NOT WHAT KRO-NO IS TO YOU, PERHAPS A MYTH, OR A MACHINE-GOD.

BUT I HEAR HIS VOICE IN MY DREAMS. I KNOW.

IT WAS BECAUSE KRO-NO FELL ASLEEP THAT THE WATER FROZE INTO ICE, THAT THE AIR BLOWS OUT INTO THE VOID, THAT THE FIRE BURNS THE OXYGEN.

THAT THE EARTH HAS DRIED UP...

AN APOCALYPSE IN SLOW MOTION.

TIME, TIME STANDS STILL.

IT IS *THE STILL ERA*. A STATIONARY EARTH.

THE GREATEST EVIL IN THE WORLD IS INERTIA. IT IS A DARK FORCE.

OF COURSE, THIS COULD CONTINUE FOR A FEW MORE CYCLES..OR CENTURIES.

OF COURSE, WE CAN ALWAYS JUST HOPE THAT SOMETHING WILL HAPPEN--A MIRACLE THAT SAVES THE WORLD..

BUT HOPE IS A PLAGUE. THE LAST ONE, SCRAPED FROM THE BUCKET THE GODS GAVE THE WORLD.

HOPE IS A TRAP.

I CALL OUT TO THE LIVING.

TO THE PALE CHOSEN, TO THE TITANS MADE OF FLESH AND METAL, AND EVEN TO YOU, MACHINE-GODS.. AND TO ALL THE OTHERS WHO WALK THIS EARTH, FROM *THE DAY POLE* TO *THE NIGHT POLE*, FROM THE ARC TO THE ANTARC, MEN AND MUTANTS, BARBARIAN NOMADS AND RADONS, SILVEREYES, BATRACHIAN MONSTERS..

..AND BLUE-WINGED PSELLS..

..TO ALL LIVING BEINGS..

LIBERA ME!

LET US ALL..

..SET KRO-NO FREE.

SOMETHING OR SOMEONE..

..CAN DISRUPT THE WORLD ORDER..

..BREAK THE STASIS.

DANGER!

I WOULD HAVE LIKED TO KEEP HAIR ON MY LEGS, DAMMIT...

YOU'VE SOWED THE DRAGON'S TEETH, ARKADI, THAT WARRIORS MAY SPROUT FROM THEM. BUT THE CHOSEN...

I KNOW. I DOUBT I'VE CHANGED THEIR MINDS. SO BE IT. WE'LL PROCEED WITHOUT THEM.

PRO-ME IS MORE THAN JUST A ROBOT, RIGHT?

CORRECT. HE IS A CYBORG, LIKE ME. HE HAS A BRAIN MADE OF FLESH, AS I DO, AND A PROGRAM.

THIS IS PRO-ME'S BRAIN!

OR-PHE?! AT LONG LAST, MY TITAN BROTHER!

BUT THAT'S... THAT'S AN *ANIMAL*! CONTROLLING THE MOST POWERFUL TITAN OF ALL!

AN "APE," YES. AN EXTINCT SPECIES. GENETICALLY MODIFIED, OF COURSE.

I'M NOT SURE WHO MADE THAT DECISION. THEY PROBABLY WANTED A BLANK CANVAS, AN AVAILABLE BRAIN, EASY TO CONFIGURE. NOT AS REBELLIOUS AS THE BRAIN OF A CERTAIN POET!

PRO-ME HAS COMPLETED HIS MISSION!

THE SUN SHINES OVER DIS. YES, *THE CHOSEN* ARE WARM, AWAKE AND BATHED IN ITS LIGHT.

YOU SHOULD BE PROUD OF YOURSELF, MY FRIEND!

HOWEVER, TO GO WHERE WE ARE GOING, WE NEED YOUR HARDWARE... YOUR "BODY." AND YOUR PROGRAM WOULDN'T LIKE THAT.

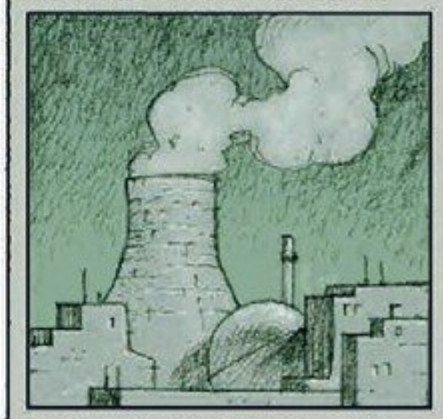
SO OM-6, MY SERVANT, WILL TAKE YOUR PLACE.

CAN YOU TAKE ME BACK TO THE VILLAGE OF ACCAIA? PRO-ME LIKED IT THERE. THOSE VILLAGERS SAW HIM AS A GOD-- NOT A SLAVE.

WE'LL ENTRUST YOU TO THE BIO-DOCS. YOU WILL REMAIN IN DIS. YOU WILL BE HAPPY HERE.

DIGITAL RECORDING OF THE CONVERSATION BETWEEN *THE CHOSEN ONE* OM-6 AND THE FOREIGNER ARKADI.
(SECURITY BREACH. UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS TO HEL'S MEMORIES. RESTRICTED FILE "KRO-NO.")

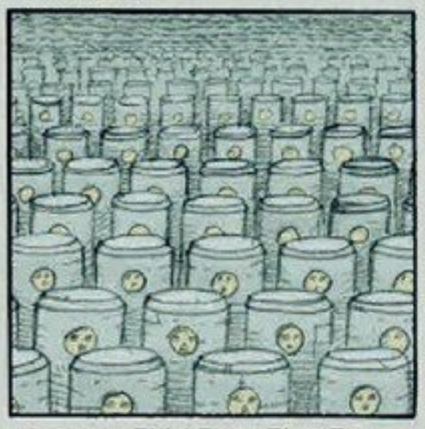
-DURING THE INDUSTRIAL ERA, THE PROBLEM OF RADIOACTIVE WASTE PRODUCED BY POWER PLANTS (WHICH OR-PHE REFERS TO AS "RAD'S EXCREMENT") HAD BECOME SO GREAT THAT IT REQUIRED DRASTIC MEASURES.



IT TAKES CERTAIN BYPRODUCTS OF NUCLEAR FISSION, CALLED ACTINIDES, THOUSANDS, EVEN MILLIONS OF YEARS TO LOSE THEIR RADIOACTIVITY.

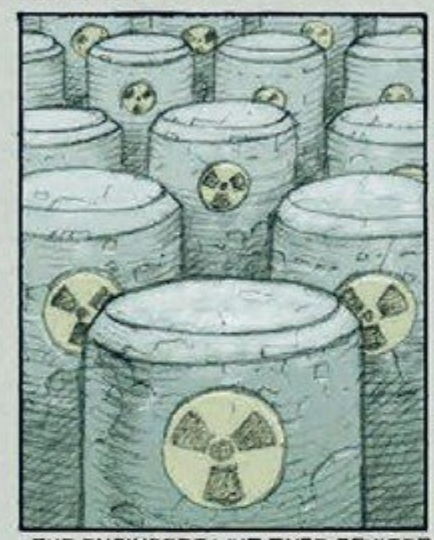
-CAN WE DESTROY THIS POISON, I.E. THE "*RAD*"?

–NOT ACCORDING TO THE LAWS OF PHYSICS.



–THERE IS ONLY ONE SOLUTION: TIME. THIS MEANS WAITING UNTIL THE WASTE LOSES ITS GAMMA RAYS NATURALLY.

–SO WHAT DO WE DO WITH IT IN THE MEANTIME? HOW DO WE GET RID OF IT?

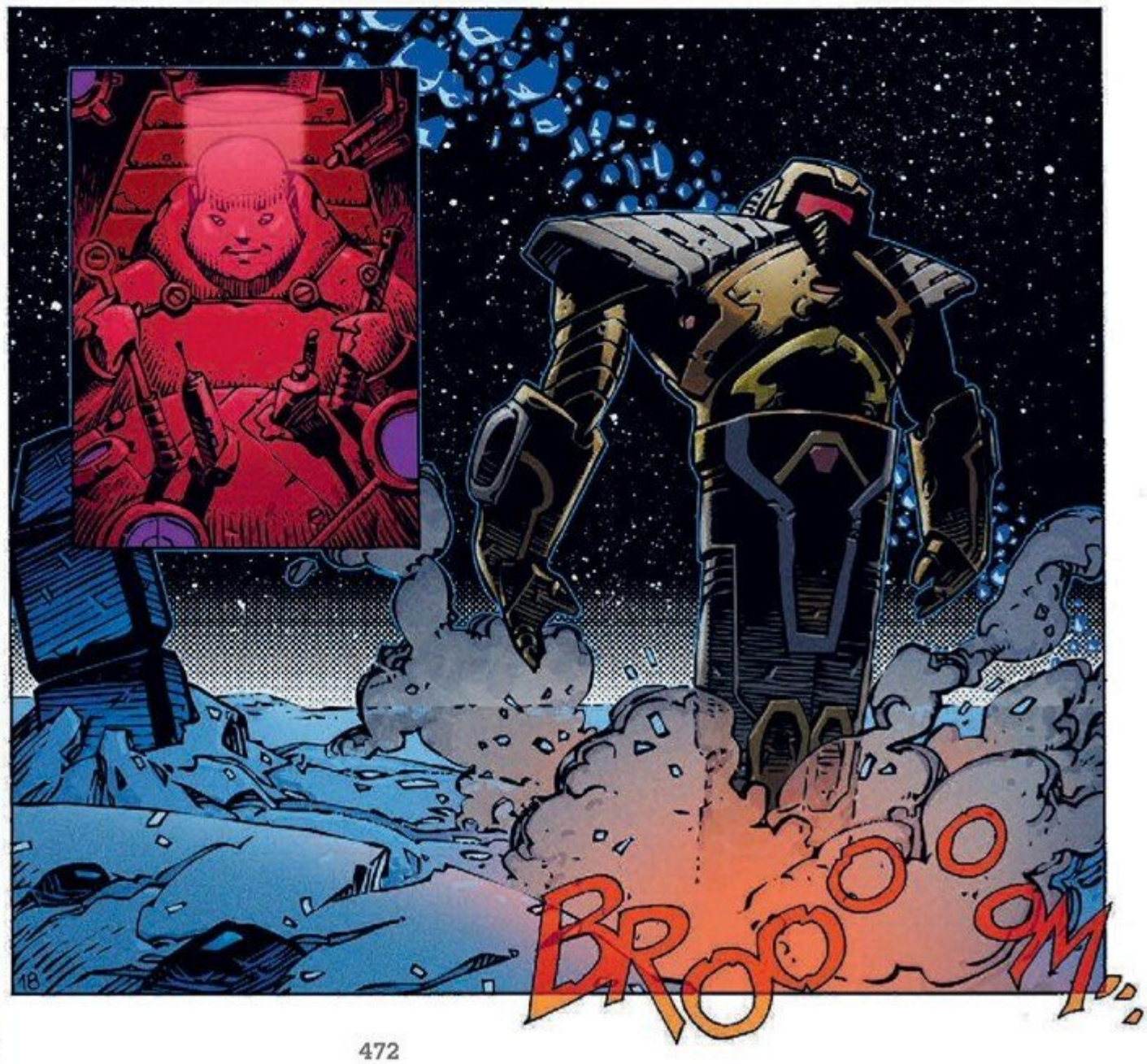


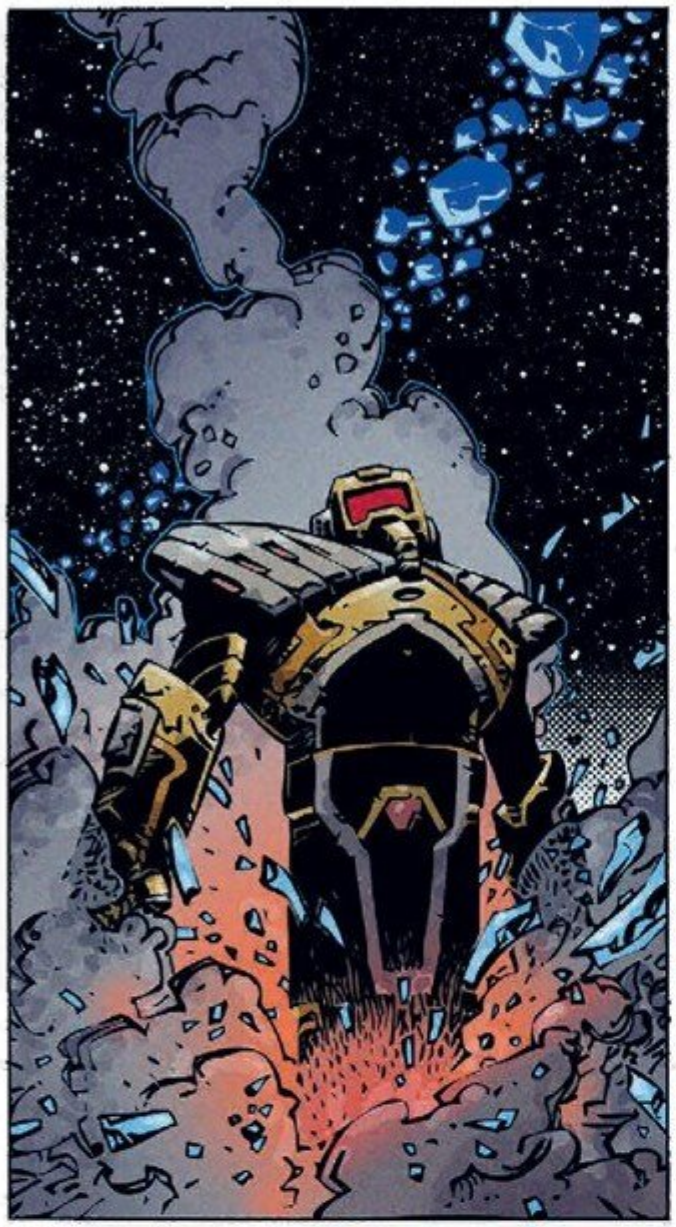
–THE ENGINEERS WHO ONCE ADVISED WORLD LEADERS DISCUSSED THE ISSUE EXTENSIVELY. A COLLECTIVE NAMED KRO-NO EVENTUALLY MADE A DECISION.

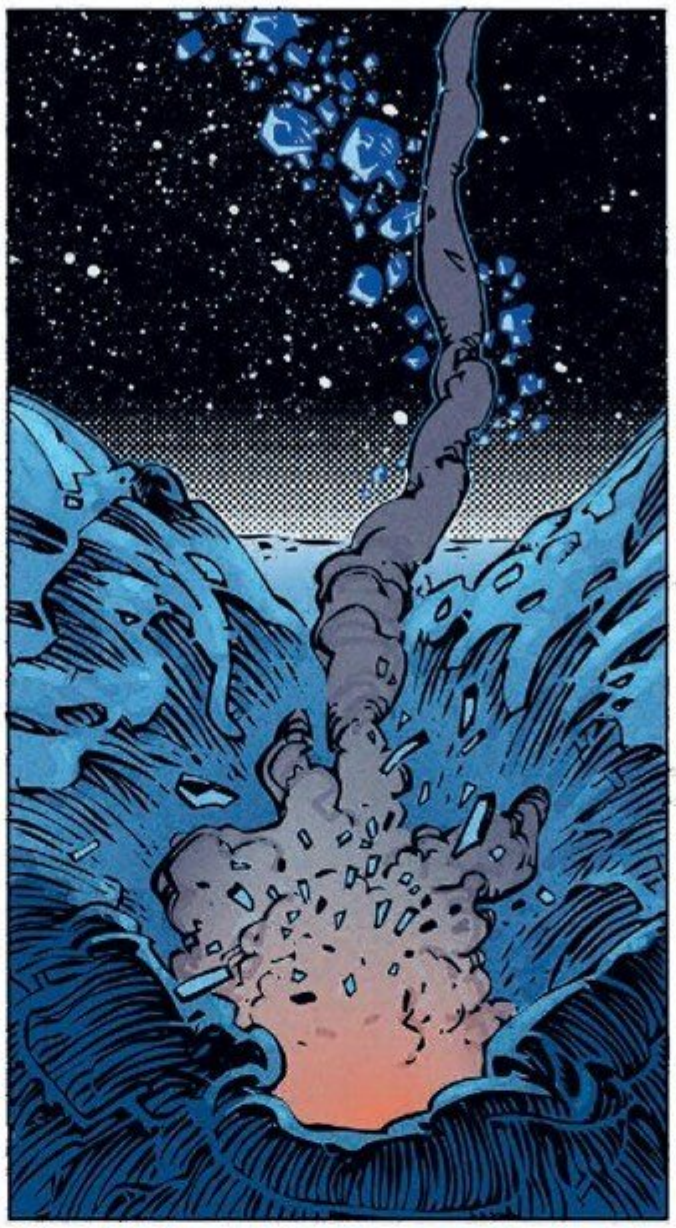
–A COLLECTIVE? KRO-NO IS A GROUP OF ENGINEERS?

–WAS. K.R.O.-N.O WAS THE ACRONYM FOR A THINK TANK MADE UP OF THREE MEN, TWO WOMEN, AND ONE "NEUTRAL," REPRESENTED BY THE HYPHEN.

–THEY DECIDED THE WORLD SHOULD STOP BURYING NUCLEAR WASTE ALL OVER THE PLACE AND INSTEAD, BUILD A SINGULAR PILE ON THE SURFACE, IN ONE PLACE, AWAY FROM CIVILIZATION.

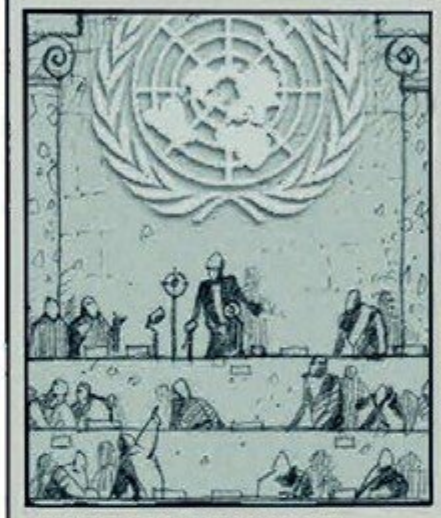






THEY CHOSE THE WORLD'S MOST ISOLATED ISLAND, EASTER ISLAND, IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC, BELOW THE TROPIC OF CAPRICORN.

THIS DECISION DID NOT MEET THE UNANIMOUS APPROVAL OF ALL ENGINEERS AND POPULATIONS, YET IT WAS VOTED INTO LAW AND ENFORCED.



WORLD LEADERS PROBABLY THOUGHT, "BAH! IT WON'T STOP THE EARTH FROM SPINNING!"

–THEY WERE WRONG!

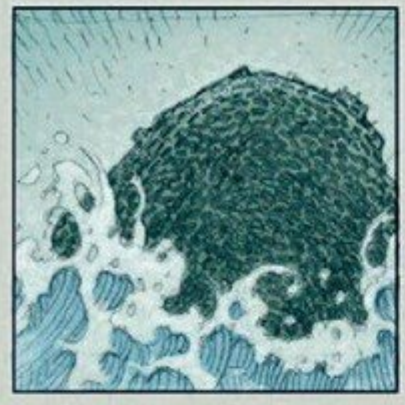
–YES. THE WEIGHT BEARING DOWN ON THE "ISLAND OF SILENCE," A COMBINATION OF THE WEIGHT OF THE WASTE AND THAT OF ITS CEMENT, LEAD, AND CERAMIC CONTAINERS, QUICKLY BECAME UNMANAGEABLE.

THE MEDIA INITIALLY CALLED IT "THE PILE," THEN IT GRADUALLY BECAME *"THE MASS."*

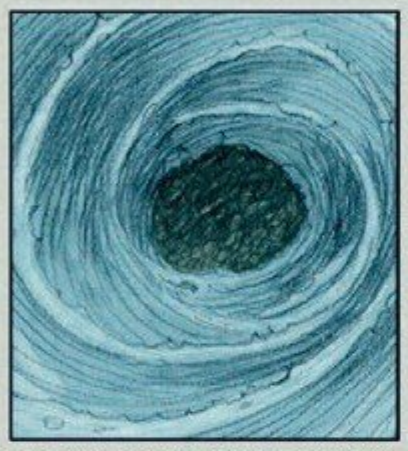
–*THE MASS*, OF COURSE.

–*THE MASS* WAS THERE, ON THE DESERT ISLAND, UNAPPROACHABLE, UNTOUCHABLE, AND TOXIC FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS.
EVERY SINGLE GRAM OF IT CARRIED INVISIBLE DEATH: CANCER, DEFORMITIES, WILD MUTATIONS, GENETIC FLAWS...
...NOT TO MENTION THE HORRIFIC WEAPONS OF DESTRUCTION THAT COULD BE MADE FROM THAT WASTE SHOULD HUMANITY START WARRING AGAIN.

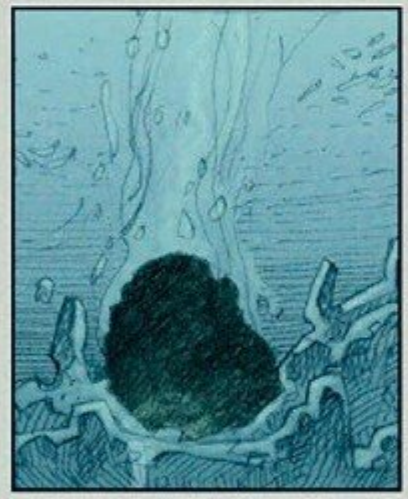
IT WAS THE WEIGHT OF A WHOLE DYING GENERATION. THE WEIGHT OF AN ERA.



–EASTER ISLAND COLLAPSED UNDER THIS WEIGHT. *THE MASS* FELL INTO THE OCEAN, DRAGGING WITH IT WHAT WAS LEFT OF THE ISLAND DOWN INTO THE DEEP.



IT PIERCED THROUGH THE EARTH'S CRUST, GRANITE, AND BASALT, THE LITHOSPHERE…THE MANTLE… ENTERED THE MAGMA…



…ENTERED THE CORE. YES, *THE MASS* WENT ALL THE WAY DOWN TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH!

"I AM THE NEW ANGEL OF THE ABYSS, ABADDON!"

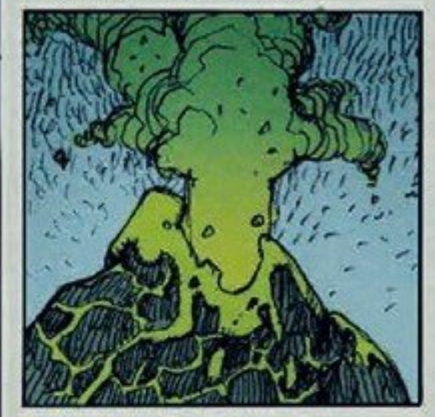
ENOUGH WITH THE APOCALYPTIC TALK, JONAH. IT'S A DRAG!

WHERE ARE WE, OR-PHE? THIS DOESN'T MATCH THE DESCRIPTION IN HEL'S FILES...

WE ARE IN BETWEEN WORLDS, ARKADI. OUTSIDE OF SPACE AND TIME... FORGET WHAT YOU LEARNED FROM PAN-DRA'S BOX.

HERE IN THE BOTTOMLESS CAVE IS THE REALM OF THE POETS--THEIR WORDS, IMAGES, ARCHETYPES, DREAMS, AND SYMBOLS.

--THIS CAUSED EXTREME DISASTERS: TEARS IN THE EARTH'S CRUST, SHIFTING OF THE TECTONIC PLATES, EARTHQUAKES, TSUNAMIS, VOLCANIC ERUPTIONS, ETC.



AND THE LAVA, POLLUTED BY *THE MASS*, WAS RADIOACTIVE.

--THE SOLUTION WAS PROVING TO BE WORSE THAN THE PROBLEM!

--NEGATIVE EFFECTS, ARKADI! WE ALWAYS FORGET ABOUT THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS!

THEN... THEN, IT WOULD SEEM THAT *THE MASS* TRAVELED PAST THE CENTER OF THE EARTH AND SETTLED UNDERNEATH THE ASIAN CONTINENT.

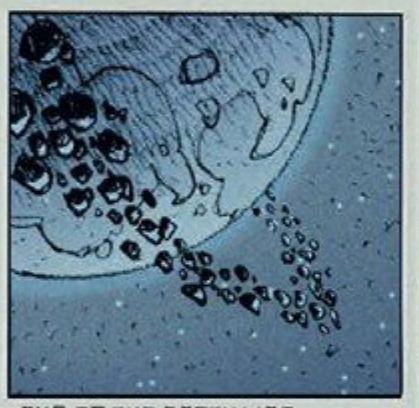
IN DOING SO, IT IS THOUGHT TO HAVE PUSHED BACK ENORMOUS AMOUNTS OF INTERNAL MAGMA, THEREBY SHIFTING THE WORLD'S CENTER OF GRAVITY. WE WILL LIKELY NEVER KNOW HOW, EXACTLY. THE MAGNETIC FIELD, THE CENTRIPETAL FORCE, THE GRAVITATIONAL PULL OF THE SUN?

IT'S ALL SUCH AN EXTREMELY COMPLEX SYSTEM...

–IN SHORT, A PLANET OFF-KILTER, A PLANET THAT SLOWED DOWN... AND THEN STOPPED ROTATING ALTOGETHER. IT ESSENTIALLY COMPLETES ONE ROTATION AROUND ITS AXIS IN THE TIME IT ORBITS AROUND THE SUN, I.E. ONE "YEAR." HENCE THE REASON IT EVER ONLY HAS ONE SIDE FACING IT, JUST AS OUR MOON USED TO, BACK WHEN IT ORBITED AROUND US.

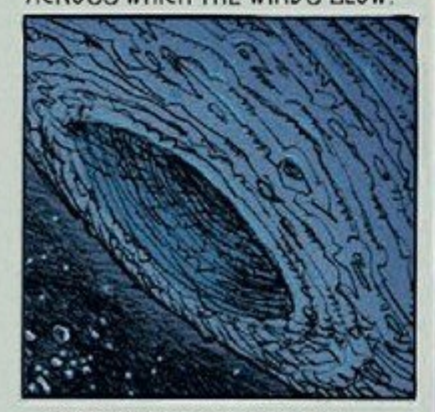
THE MOON THAT CRACKED UNDER THE NEW GRAVITATIONAL PULL, SHATTERING INTO PIECES THAT FORMED THE RING YOU NOW KNOW.

–THE MOONSTONES, YES. THE REALM OF THE PSELLS.



–AND SO THE EARTH WAS RESHAPED, WITH ITS BURNING DIURNAL SIDE, "*DAY*," CENTERED ON THE TALLEST MOUNTAIN RANGE ON THE ASIAN CONTINENT, HIMMALAH...

...AND ITS DARK SIDE, "*NIGHT*," CENTERED ON EASTER ISLAND. -THE WORLDS' DARK POLE. AND BETWEEN THE TWO IS "*TWILIGHT*," ACROSS WHICH THE WINDS BLOW.



–EARTH IN *THE STILL ERA*! A STATIONARY EARTH. YES, OUR WORLD.

IT FEELS LIKE WE COULD KEEP FALLING FOREVER!

SURRENDER...

"EVERY DAY WE DESCEND A STEP FURTHER TOWARD HELL, WITHOUT HORROR, THROUGH GLOOM THAT STINKS.

"THERE SINKS AND IS SWALLOWED UP, IN WAVES OF DISASTERS, THE HYDRA UNIVERSE TWISTING ITS BODY SCALED WITH STARS...

"THERE, EVERYTHING FLOATS, DISAPPEARS INTO A DARK WRECK..."

-ON ONE SIDE, THE OCEANS WERE BOILING, ON THE OTHER, THEY TURNED INTO ICE. THE EFFECTS ON EARTH'S CLIMATE AND ON THE LIVES OF MEN BROUGHT ABOUT THE END OF CIVILIZATION.

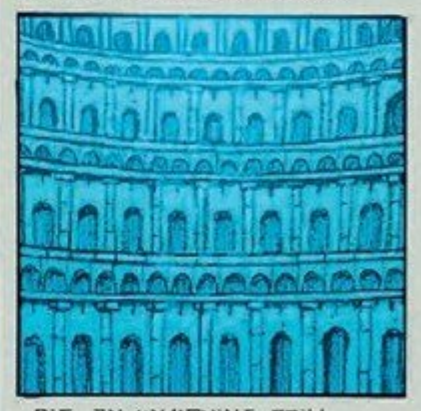
THE HUMAN SPECIES NEARLY WENT EXTINCT. PEOPLE DIED BY THE BILLIONS!

-THERE WERE *THAT* MANY PEOPLE ON EARTH THEN?!

-MORE THAN YOU COULD POSSIBLY IMAGINE, ARKADI!

AS MUTANT MONSTERS ROAMED THE RAVAGED PLANET, THE SURVIVORS, FALLEN HUMANS, LOCKED THEMSELVES INSIDE, AND USED EVER MORE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY TO CORRECT THE ERRORS OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY.

AND THUS DIS WAS FOUNDED-BUILT INSIDE THE FUNNEL OF ICE CREATED WHEN THE ISLAND COLLAPSED.



-DIS... AN UNMOVING, STILL ENCLAVE... A CITY UNDER A DOME, POPULATED BY...SIMPLIFIED HUMANS. ONE STILLNESS TO CORRECT ANOTHER STILLNESS.

"IN THIS ABYSS WITHOUT EDGE, WITHOUT WINDOWS, WITHOUT WALLS...

"OF EVERYTHING THAT EVER LIVED, ASHES RAIN INCESSANTLY...

-THEY SEIZED THE CULPRITS, THE KRO-NO COLLECTIVE, THE FALSE PROPHETS.

THEY DIDN'T KILL THEM. NO... NOT QUITE.

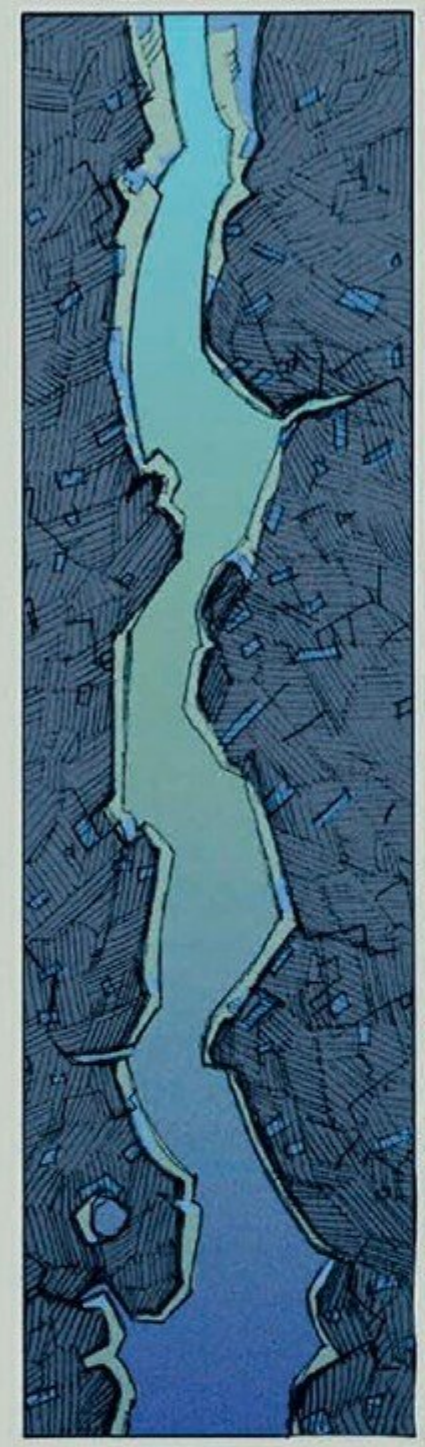
THE ENGINEERS COMPILED THEIR MINDS, DIGITIZED THEM, TURNING THEM INTO A SORT OF HUMAN COMPUTER INTEGRATED INTO A... HOW SHALL I PUT IT? A SOFT-TISSUE MACHINE... A TRILLION NANO-MOLECULES, ACTUALLY.

-A MACHINE-GOD! SO THAT'S WHAT KRO-NO IS!

-I SEE YOU NOW REALLY UNDERSTAND THE SYMBIOSIS BETWEEN METAL AND FLESH.

-MY MOTHER ALWAYS SAID IT WAS EVIL, JONAH! EVIL

–HMM… SO, THEY THREW KRO-NO INTO THE BOTTOMLESS PIT CREATED BY *THE MASS*. THAT PIT IS ENCASED IN THE EARTH'S CRUST AND WAS GIVEN A NAME: "THE WELL OF DEAD MEMORIES."



AND UPON *THE MASS*, UPON KRO-NO, THEY PLACED THE HEAVY LID OF OBLIVION.

"AND AT THE VERY BOTTOM, SHOULD ONE'S EYE DARE VENTURE THERE, ONE CAN SEE…

"…BEYOND LIFE, AND BREATH AND SOUND…

DOOMED, I WAS! DISCARDED LIKE REFUSE, I WAS!

KRO-NO?!

YES, ARKADI. I AM HERE. VERY NEAR.

"...A HORRIBLE BLACK SUN FROM WHICH THE NIGHT SHONE!"

-AFTERWARDS, HAUNTED BY THE TERROR OF SEEING THE NUCLEAR WASTE SPREAD DEATH ALL OVER THE WORLD AGAIN, THE ENGINEERS ALSO CREATED A CYBERNETIC PROTECTIVE ENTITY, A BODY OF GUARDS THEY CALLED...

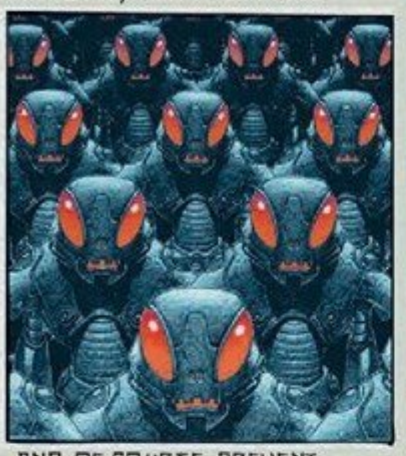
-LEGION!

-YES. "AN UNVARYING PROGRAM IN A MACHINE WITH DISTRIBUTED CONTROL." IN OTHER WORDS, AN ARMY OF INTERCONNECTED ROBOTS MOVING AS ONE. ONE THOUSAND AND TEN THOUSAND BODIES WITH A SINGLE CONSCIOUSNESS, GUIDED BY A SINGLE MISSION!

WHAT IS THAT?

DID YOU NOT SEE IT IN YOUR DREAMS? IT'S THE MASS!

THAT MISSION IS TO TRACK ALL TRACES OF RADIOACTIVE PRODUCTS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD, LOCK UP SAID PRODUCTS IN THE PIT, WITH *THE MASS*...



...AND, OF COURSE, PREVENT ANYONE OR ANYTHING FROM ACCESSING *THE MASS*...OR LEAVING IT.

...UNTIL THE END OF TIME!

IT LOOKS LIKE IT'S MADE OF LEAD...

...OR COVERED...

...IN LEGION!

...SO THEN LEGION, THE BLACK GOLEMS, AREN'T REALLY DEMONS! THEY'RE OUR PROTECTORS! IT'S NOT *EVIL*!

...IT'S A NECESSARY EVIL, PERHAPS, FOR NOW... BUT ONE CAN NEVER BE TOO CAREFUL.

...NEGATIVE EFFECT. YEAH, GOT IT!

AS FOR KRO-NO...

I DON'T KNOW ANYMORE... HE'S AT FAULT, BUT WE NEED TO--

"AT FAULT?"

I WAS GUILTY, YOU MEAN!

YES, I WAS GUILTY!

JUST LIKE ALL THE OTHER ENGINEERS! WE DREAMED OF A GOLDEN AGE OF TECHNOLOGY!

ARKADI! YOU CAN ARGUE WITH THE GODS LATER!

IN THE MEANTIME...

„THEY'RE ATTACKING!

TUM!

TUM!

TUM!

TUM!

TUM!

TUM!

TUM!

TUM!

JONAH! HELP ME!

AND..THE OTHERS?

THEY'RE HERE, ARKADI. THEY HEARD OUR CALL.

OPEN THE DOOR FOR THEM!

LOOK UP!

JEALOUS LITTLE MEN..

..VEXED THAT THE WORLD SPINS WITHOUT THEIR HELP..

KR

AA'AHK

WE COULD HAVE TURNED THE WHOLE WORLD INTO ENERGY TO SERVE OUR WILL...!

GUILTY ...?

THE SUN! WE'RE UNDER THE DAY POLE!

THE OMEGA!

RADON! THE OTHERS! THE WORLD'S LIVING BEINGS!

THEY'RE ALL HERE!

I'VE ALWAYS DREAMED OF DOING SOMETHING APOCALYPTIC!

IT'S NOW OR NEVER!

30

_WE ARE ALL GUILTY!

IT WASN'T UNTIL THOUSANDS OF YEARS LATER THAT I DETECTED A CHANGE IN *THE MASS*.

AT THE SUBATOMIC LEVEL, IT HAD REACHED A CRITICAL THRESHOLD...

...A POINT OF NO RETURN.

UNDETECTABLE FROM THE SURFACE.

I ALONE KNEW. BUT I WAS POWERLESS!

THE "LEGION PROGRAM" IS TOO PERFECT: NOTHING CAN COME IN OR GO OUT, NOT EVEN I.

ESPECIALLY NOT I!

LEGION GUARDS BOTH *THE MASS* AND I! FOR ALL ETERNITY!

BUT WHO CONTROLS THE PROGRAM? MAYBE OM-6 COULD...

NOBODY DOES.

THE CODE IS EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE... A FIELD OF COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS...

THEY ARE LIKE AN ARMY OF ANTS.

WE'LL CRUSH THEM ONE BY ONE, THEN!

THERE ARE...SO MANY OF THEM!

IS THERE ENOUGH TIME?

TIME...

THE KING OF THE ANTS?

NO... IT'S SOMETHING ELSE... HE WAS IN MY DEATH DREAM, ON TOP OF THE RED HORN...

AND AGAIN, LATER... HE HAUNTS ME CEASE-LESSLY...

HE'S HERE FOR ME!

GIVE UP!

ETERNITY... WHAT WAS I TO DO WITH ALL THAT TIME? SLEEP... DREAM, MAYBE?

STEAL ORPHE'S DREAMS...SO I COULD FINALLY REACH YOU!

WE ARE IN THE PLACE WHERE IT ALL COMES TOGETHER, ARKADI.

AND NOW, STRIKE!

SET FREE THE ONE WHO HAUNTS YOU!

FREE ME OF LEGION, ARKADI!

LIBERA ME!

ALBE'S LUZ!?

ARKAS...?

I...

FATHER?!

WHO...?

ARKADI, SON OF ALBE, OF THE VILLAGE OF ACCAIA.

YOUR SON.

SUCH DARK-NESS...

LEGION SAW ME IN KRO-NO'S DREAMS!

HE POSSESSED ME!

HE TORTURED MY FLESH AND MY SOUL!

"I HOWLED... BUT WHO WOULD HEAR ME...?"

"SHADOW" DID. MY DARK TWIN, MY MONSTER BROTHER, THE FOREIGN BODY.

HE WAS...YOUR MARK ON ME... FATHER.

HE WAS THE ONE WHO DETECTED YOUR CRIES--AND THE DARK CALL OF LEGION, WHICH TRIED TO DROWN OUT KRO-NO'S VOICE.

IT'S ALL OVER NOW.

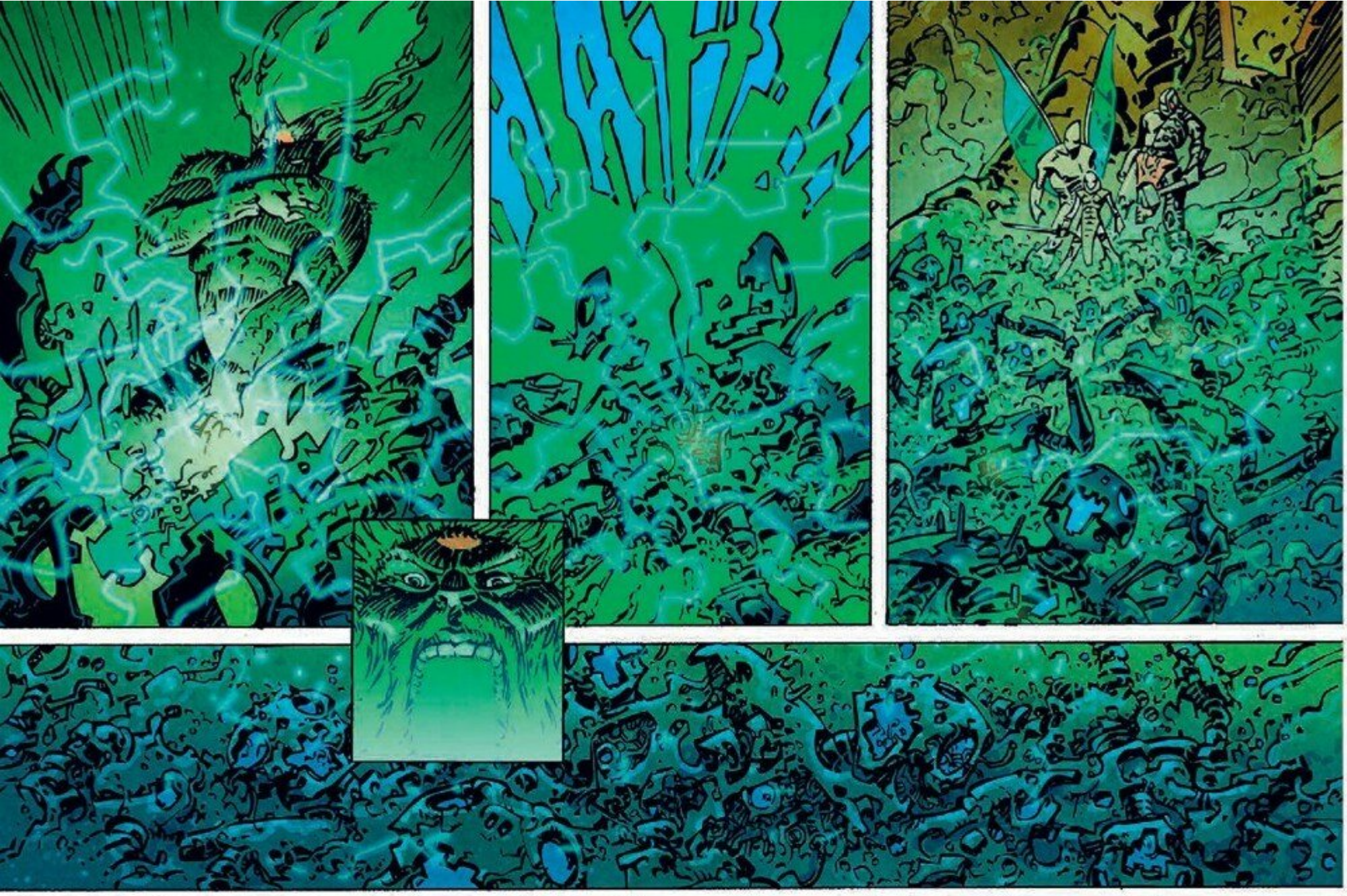
BUT YOU STILL HAD MY MOONSTONE, THE ONE THAT SHATTERED ME... AND STILL RESONATES WITH... ALBE'S LUZ ON MY FOREHEAD.

HELP ME UP, ARKADI...

...SON OF ALBE...

...SON OF ARKAS.

MY SWORD!


ARIF

ARKADI!

THE GUARDIAN IS NO LONGER.

THE PATH IS OPEN.

COME CLOSER..

COME TO ME..

ENTER..

ARKADI..?

GO BEYOND...

...THE "EVENT HORIZON."

MEMORIES...

QUESTIONS.

TIME.

NO MORE TOILING IN THE DARK.

THE SLEEPER IS AWAKE.

YOU ARE...

I AM KRO-NO, YES.

...JUST AS I SAW YOU IN MY VISIONS.

THE OLD SAGE...WITH BEARD OF WHITE... THE PHILOSOPHER... OR ALCHEMIST...

AN IMAGE, YOUNG MAN... WHAT YOU SEE IS MERELY THE GUISE THROUGH WHICH I CHOSE TO APPEAR TO YOU. LIKE THE UNICORN...

"PLASMA" ILLUSIONS FOUND IN ARCHETYPES FROM TIME IMMEMORIAL... AND DREAMS STOLEN FROM ORPHE.

YOU KNOW THIS NOW. "KRO-NO" IS BUT THE MERGING OF A FEW DIGITIZED HUMAN MINDS, COMPILED INTO A MASS OF NANO-CIRCUITS.

MACHINE-GOD, AS YOU SAY...

WHAT... WHAT OF *THE MASS*? ARE WE... INSIDE IT?

HMM... INSIDE... OUTSIDE... TIME AND SPACE DON'T MEAN MUCH, "HERE."

WE COULD SAY WE'RE INSIDE *THE MASS*, YES.

OR THAT *THE MASS* IS MERELY...

...THIS.

I... I DON'T UNDERSTAND...

THE MASS' EVOLUTION HAS REACHED ITS FINAL STAGE-- ITS QUINT-ESSENCE.

INSIDE ITS ATOMS, THE ELECTRONS NO LONGER SPIN AROUND THEIR NUCLEUS. THEY FALL, COLLAPSE--A SLOW MOTION IMPLOSION UNTIL A STANDSTILL.

THIS IS WHAT I'D DETECTED: A CRITICAL THRESHOLD IN WHICH *THE MASS* COLLAPSED UNDER ITS OWN WEIGHT AND SHRUNK TO A NEARLY NON-EXISTENT SIZE ENDOWED WITH INFINITE DENSITY.

IT'S CALLED "A GRAVITATIONAL SINGULARITY"...

...OR "A BLACK HOLE."

BUT WHAT I SEE IS--

TECHNICALLY, YOU SEE NOTHING.

WHAT YOU THINK YOU SEE IS THE ABSENCE OF ANYTHING VISIBLE...

...A HOLE IN THE VOID!

THIS...NAMELESS THING...HAS AN INFINITE POWER OF ATTRACTION. IT BENDS SPACE AND SLOWS TIME.

IT HOLDS LIGHT ITSELF CAPTIVE!

THE GOOD PART IS, THE GAMMA RAYS --THE CURSE OF RAD--ALSO REMAIN TRAPPED THERE.

THE BAD PART: THAT THIS STRANGE ATTRACTOR BORN OF THE DARK FORCE OF ATOMS— THE ABSOLUTE NEGATIVE OF LIFE, THE CANCER—WOULD EVENTUALLY SWALLOW THE WORLD…

…OR TURN IT INSIDE OUT!

AND YET, THE PULL OF THE SUN DRAGGED THIS THING ALL THE WAY HERE, TO *THE DAY POLE. KETHER*, THE CROWN…

THE OMEGA!

THERE IS NO ABSOLUTE EVIL, ONLY POLES THAT ARE BOTH OPPOSITE AND COMPLEMENTARY.

DAY…

NIGHT…

SULFUR AND MERCURY…

SHADOW… AND AMBER…

LEAD…

…AND GOLD.

THE MASTER OF THE *ARS MAGNA*, THE ALCHEMIST… IS YOU, OR-PHE.

AND THAT IS WHY YOU ARE HERE, ARKADI AND OR-PHE.

SO THAT AT LAST…

…THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA MAY COME TOGETHER AND MERGE…

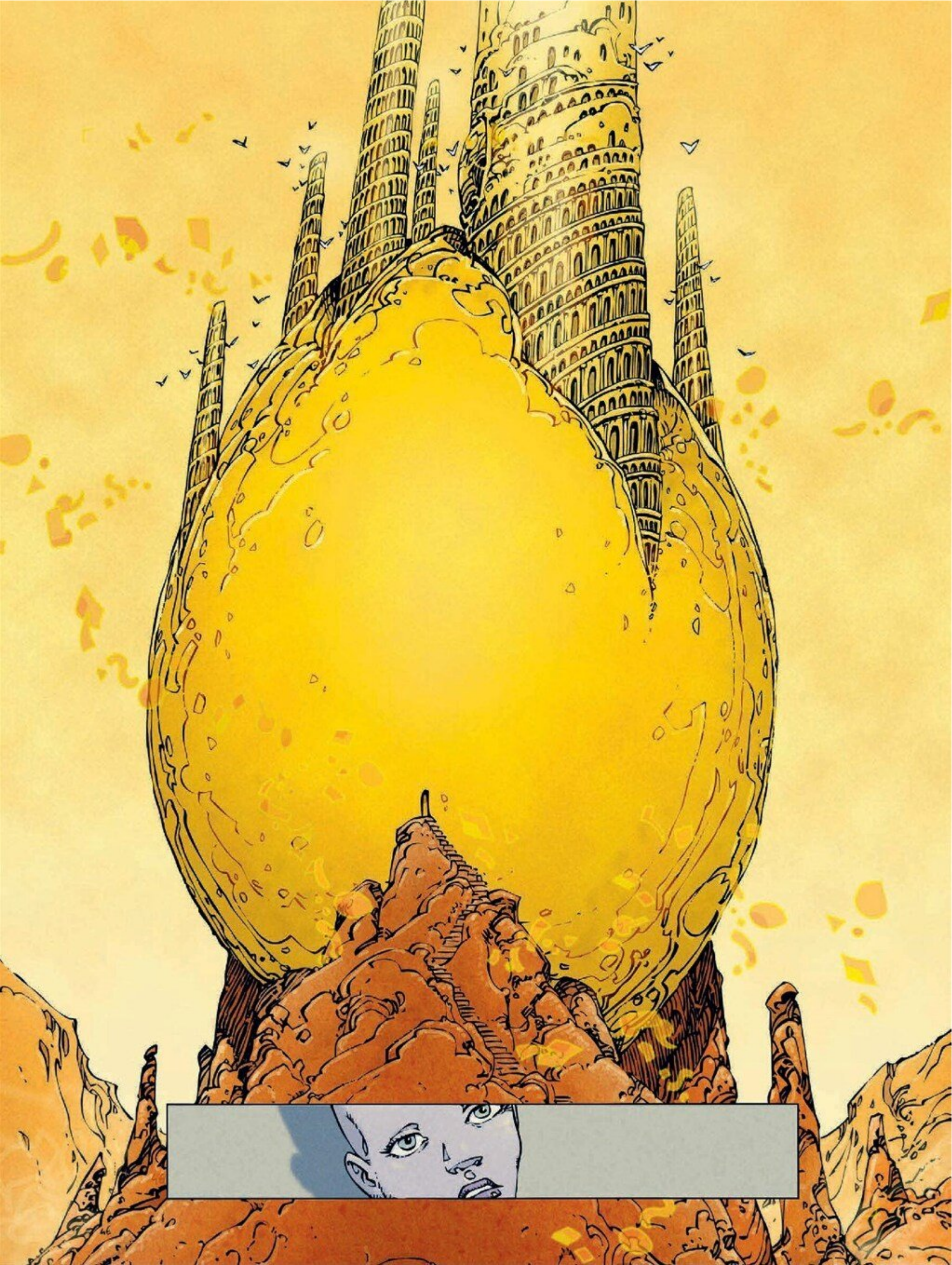
…HERE AND NOW.

I TOLD YOU, ARKADI: SET ME FREE, AND FREE YOURSELF...

...AND SO MUCH MORE...

FREE...

...THE WORLD.



THE LEAD HAS TURNED TO GOLD!

IT'S OR-PHE!

AND_ ARKADI_?

I'M HERE.

OR-PHE STAYED BEHIND.

TIME TO FULFIL HIS OWN DREAM OF SAILING AMONG THE STARS AND RACING AGAINST COMETS, I SUPPOSE.

I CAN'T THINK OF ANYONE BETTER THAN THE POET TO SAIL KRO-NO'S SHIP THROUGH SPACE...

47

HE DID LEAVE ME WITH SOMETHING, THOUGH...

...HIS ARM OF GOLD.

SO THAT... THAT'S A SHIP?

IT'S AN ARK, YES.

AN ARK FOR THE CHOSEN.

HEL!

NO. I AM KRO. NO. I TOOK ON HEL'S FAVORITE FORM. IT IS FAMILIAR TO THE CHOSEN.

CHOSEN? WHERE ARE THEY?

ON THE ARK. THEY'RE WAITING FOR YOU, CHOSEN ONE OM-6.

YOU WERE SLEEPING. CAUGHT IN A CLUSTER OF TIME.

WHILE TRANSMUTATION WAS UNDERWAY.

OR-PHE'S MASTER-WORK.

NOW, THE POET WILL GUIDE US THROUGH THE STARS AND LIGHT-YEARS.

TOWARDS ANOTHER EARTH-- A CELESTIAL CITY FOR THE CHOSEN.

THE MASS-- THE "SINGULARITY;" NOW THAT IT IS DARK ANTI-MATTER--WILL POWER OUR ARK.

48

NOW FREE OF *THE MASS'* WEIGHT, THE EARTH SHOULD AGAIN SPIN ON ITS AXIS.

IF WE HAVE TO, WE'LL PUSH-- *HNN!*

WHAT OF YOU, MEN OF *THE GREAT EXTERIOR?* AND YOU, CLONE *U-RI-D.C.*-- OR *PAN-DRA?* WILL YOU JOIN US AMONG THE STARS?

US?

WE'RE STAYING HERE ON EARTH, OF COURSE!

METAL-MEN, MACHINE-GODS! TAKE YOUR CHOSEN, YOUR DEAD MEMORIES, AND YOUR FILES...

KRO-NO! HEL! AND ALL THE OTHER "TITANS," ROBOTS, ANDROIDS, AND CYBORGS, CHILDREN OF THE ATOM AND OF THE MACHINE...

...AND YES, *OR-PHE!*

BEAT IT!

WE EARTHLINGS, RESIDENTS OF PLANET EARTH, WANT A WORLD WITHOUT GODS!

IN OTHER WORDS: *GO TAKE A HIKE AMONG YOUR PRECIOUS STARS!*

49

I MUST GO... ORPHE WILL BE NEEDING HIS SERVANT.

I'M BACK TO BEING OM-6.

ARE YOU SURE YOU DON'T WANT TO STAY? THERE'S PLENTY OF ROOM ON EARTH...

AND PROBABLY LOTS OF TASTY DISHES YOU HAVEN'T EVEN TRIED YET... JONAH.

DON'T TEMPT ME! YOU KNOW I'VE ALWAYS DREAMED ORPHE WOULD TAKE ME UP INTO THE STARS.

WELL, IN THAT CASE...

FAREWELL, SERVANT!

FAREWELL, METALWORKER!

60

BROOO

FAREWELL, OR-PHE...

BROOOOOMM

A FLASH OF GOLD IN THE SKY.

52

I'D LIKE TO RETURN TO THE PLACE CALLED MEDITERRA, WHERE I MET YOUR MOTHER.

BUT.. ALBE IS GONE, FATHER.

WHERE WILL YOU GO, ARKAS?

BESIDES, EARTH WILL SHIFT. THE ICE OF *NIGHT* WILL MELT.

SOON, MEDITERRA WILL BE A SEA.

IN THAT CASE.. I WILL SAIL.

I LONG FOR A PLACE WHERE THE AIR IS SWEET.. WITH GRASS, AND WATER.. AND TREES.

AND WHERE WE CAN LIVE FREE!

I WANT.. EVERYTHING EARTH HAS TO OFFER!

GLACIERS AND BURNING DESERTS, BARBARIAN DEGENERATES, ROTTED-BLOODS, MONSTERS..

..EVERYONE.

WILL WE
HAVE CHILDREN,
PAN-DRA?

CLONES
ARE STERILE,
ARKADI.

SO WHY THE
BREASTS, THEN?

PURELY FOR
DECORATION.

CAZA, THE ALCHEMIST

by Nicolas Trespallé

The greatest myths come from far, far away—from the mists of time and the uncertain depths of the first ages of mankind to tell us of seemingly unreal or inconceivable things. Beyond their diversities, cultures, eras, and sensibilities, this universal aspiration to weave stories and epics forges layers of experience that comprise a vast material, a collective memory: the common fabric from which dreams are made, and from which creators throughout time have drawn—transforming their details, disguising them, and eventually deconstructing them—free to preserve or betray their form. So, if the same stories have been revised and rethought many times over, they come across as encrypted languages, archetypes that are reinterpreted in the present, echoing a given reality as a cathartic and renewed means of expurgating anxieties and warding off disasters and fears.

Arkadi, Pencil Sketch, 2008.

Behind the myths are the storytellers who brought them to life. Behind Orpheus alone: Claudio Monteverdi, Christoph Willibald Gluck, Tintoretto, Jean-Baptiste Corot, Jean Cocteau—the list is long, impressive, dizzying. Opera, theater, cinema: Orpheus as an exceptional source of creativity could not be overlooked by sequential artists. Luckily, one of the most powerful fabulists of his generation, Philippe Caza, seized the opportunity.

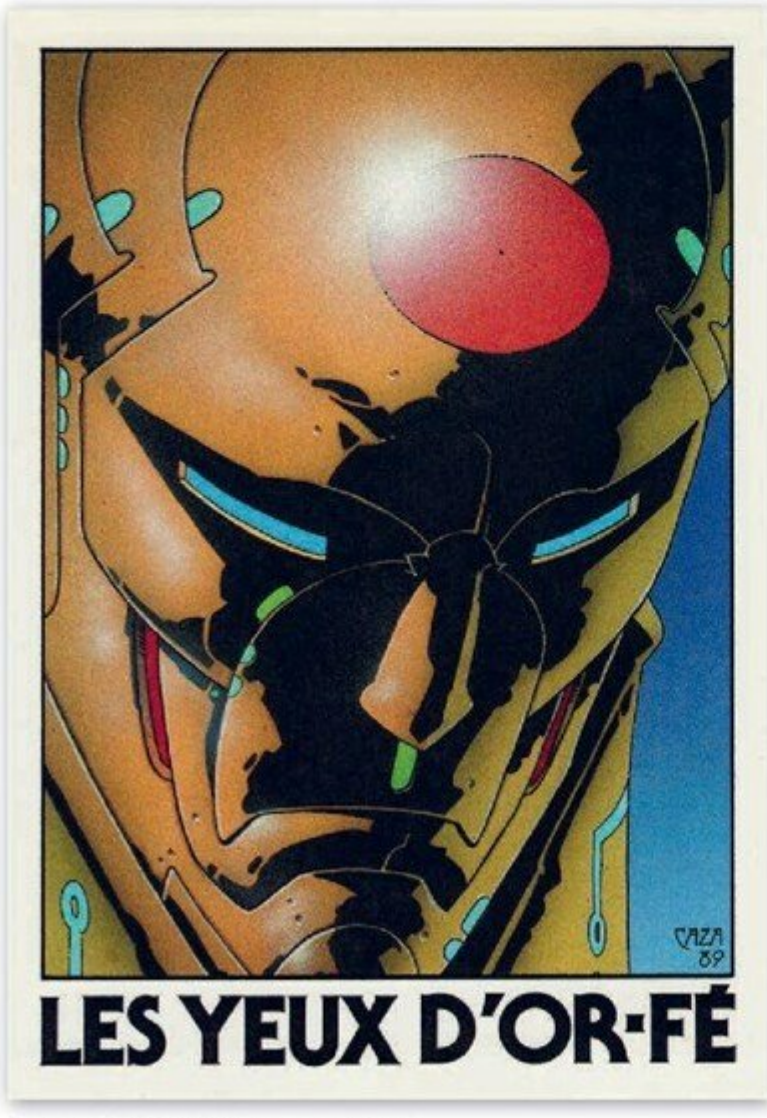
Caza is a master of the imaginary. Rare are the artists who have left such an aesthetic mark on a field that counts so many visionaries. Traversed by pop art (his early work such as *Kris Kool*), his distinctive style has blended with the energy of comics and a mannerist approach to chiaroscuro, somewhere between pointillism and chromatic explosions. Caza's rocky line seems to have been formed from a series of stratifications, producing a highly singular blend of ancient and contemporary influences, in which we can make out the shadows of Virgil Finley, Richard Corben, as well as his colleagues Druillet and Mœbius. Naturally, in the world of French speculative fiction, Caza was one of the most sought-after figures for illustrating covers—or at least one of the most iconic for over thirty years—and created many emblematic images.

An invitation to reverie, a promise of galactic adventure and cosmic vertigo, Caza's touch titillates that famous sense of wonder that has always thrilled the hearts of speculative fiction fans. While he likes to draw inspiration from the flamboyant kitsch of the early American pulps, he knows how to subvert the codes, preferring to portray a proud, charismatic warrior heroine to an eternally frightened pin-up girl. Throughout his prolific career, Caza has been

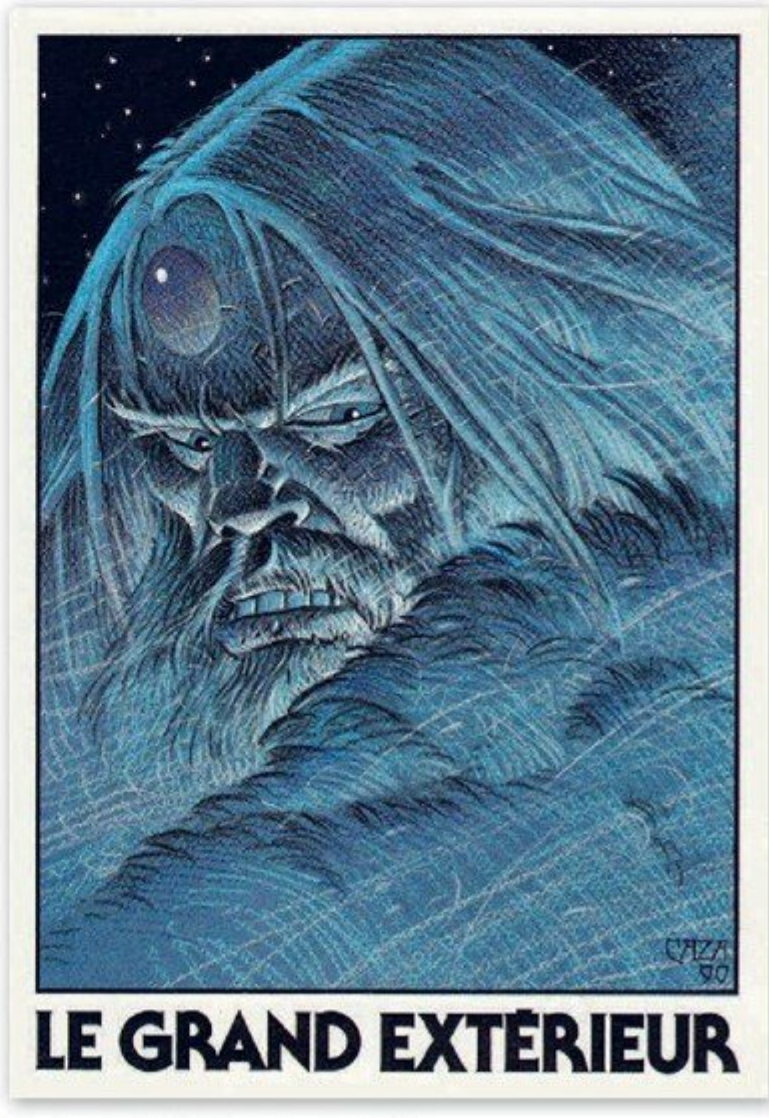
at the service of the greatest science-fiction and fantasy novelists of his time. From A to Z—or more precisely, from Asimov to Zelazny—the texts of the genre's greatest masters (as well as its amateurs) have passed through his hands. Caza has always made it a point to read the books before setting to work, and this conscientious professionalism, to his credit, has given him a fine, vast knowledge of his chosen field. Better still, it fed his brain like inexhaustible fuel for ideas. From this encyclopedic knowledge, the artist has regularly extracted things in a haphazard way for his personal work, ideas that he scrupulously records in notebooks, being the man to "jot down everything that pops into his head" since his earliest childhood. However, it was at the age of sixteen or seventeen that the seeds of *Arkadi and the Lost Titan* were discreetly sown in the embryos of novels recorded in his notebooks. The characters of Or-Phe and Arkadi had not yet been given names, but were already sketched out. The fact remains that, as is often the case, the concatenation of ideas takes side roads, waiting for a signal, an opportunity, to emerge from limbo and one day take shape as a project. In fact, the Big Bang took place before the protagonists came to life. Logical, after all. The universe precedes man. The cornerstone for *Arkadi and the Lost Titan* was laid without them.

In the early '80s, Caza was already well-recognized in his field for regularly brightening up the pages of the monthly comic book magazine *Pilote* with a series of short stories that would be brought together in *Les Habitants du crépuscule* (1982) and *Les Remparts de la nuit* (1984), two albums that would go on to form the *L'Âge d'ombre* ("The Age of Shadow") cycle. Allegorizing the wear and tear of time through the Earth's synchronous rotation on the verge of stopping, cities closed in on themselves, a dangerous outside world, a return to savagery, and mythological elements, the diptych had all the makings of a sophisticated draft of the universe to come, and can even be considered its unofficial prologue. Without yet realizing it, Caza was putting the first touches to his great story of the future—a very distant, almost mythical future in which a purely speculative cosmic problem highlights the difficulties of the present.

The turn of the '80s to '90s coincided with the end of an era for *Pilote* and its publishing house, Dargaud, with their taking over in 1988 by Média-Participations,



Postcard, LDC-Bédégramme, 1989.



Postcard, LDC-Bédégramme, 1989.

a Belgian holding company founded by Rémy Montagne. In line with Pope John Paul II's moralizing on the family and the education of young people, the new owner set about purging the publisher's catalog which had done much to promote the emergence of more adult comics. *Pilote* came to a halt, and the comic book authors deemed "problematic" (i.e. the most interesting ones) were the first to be dismissed. A loyal and regular contributor to Humanoids' magazine *Métal Hurlant* since 1976 (which was discontinued in 1987), Caza naturally sought refuge with the iconic publishing house, where editor Bruno Lecigne entrusted him with the task of imagining a science-fiction series apart from *L'Âge d'ombre*. Nevertheless, Caza decided to take his inspiration from the latter with its rich decorum, but to abandon the short story format in favor of a grand, serialized epic, an adventure "with a hero, not too much narrative, spectacular images, speech bubbles"—in short, a classical work, at least on the surface (which, of course, it wouldn't be). Five volumes were envisaged. Leaving room for improvisations and alternate endings, the general synopsis took months to mature and confronted the author with unexpected limitations of the standard 46-page Franco-Belgian format, to which he was not accustomed and found himself cramped. But he had no other choice than to comply as Humanoids planned to integrate *Arkadi and the Lost Titan* into the "Eldorado" collection, which had been home to Humanoids' greatest successes at the time, including *The Incal*. "I had a problem with that," recalls the artist soberly, who felt he had to rethink and refocus his text at the risk of not being clear enough—a fear which readers' initial feedback confirmed. He notes that "the doors of Arkadi's world weren't open enough" in this inaugural tome, which suffered from an overflow of information, confusing readers and prompting Caza to rework certain scenes and dialogues for the new edition. But he didn't respond hastily; instead, Caza paused and took the time to properly establish his universe because he saw his story as an odyssey, a fresco. He had to give it depth, present all the issues, build the geography, define the climate, check the wind direction if necessary (with a climatologist friend), and, of course, bring all the protagonists to life. Arkadi,[1] ironically, pays the price for this worldbuilding, as the hero fades into the background of the profusion of secondary characters, surprisingly only appearing in the second chapter. Paradoxically, this oddity is the hallmark of a story that thwarts the reader's expectations, sticking to the plot's arrhythmia to convey

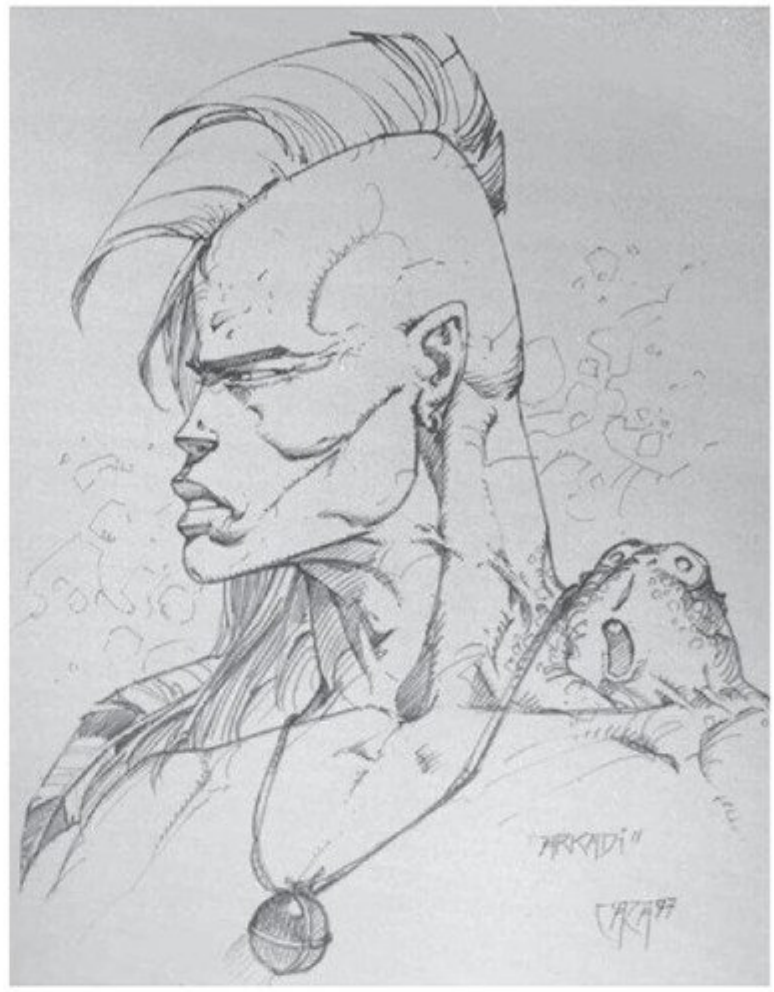
Arkas, Bookplate Illustration, Forbid, 1999.

the haunting, motionless dynamic of a civilization at a desperate standstill. Once the stakes have been patiently set, the hero embarks on an initiatory quest to discover the world and himself at the same time. In reality, it would be more accurate to describe him as an anti-hero. Excluded from the city, ostracized, Arkadi the orphan has only to emerge from his gangue to become a providential man. He would become the active agent dynamizing an atonic environment, the short-circuit provoking the disruptive discharge. Almost unwillingly, the teenager is obliged to set off, marked by the seal of infamy and the guilt shared by all the main characters in this story—Arkas, the father, and even more so Or-Phe, the involuntary trigger of the great chaos around which the fate of Arkadi's universe will be woven. A New Testament of Orpheus begins.[2]

Orpheus, the poet-god endowed with all artistic gifts, could not fail to interest a creator of worlds like Caza. The ultimate tragic figure and expiatory victim, Orpheus is the most human of deities, the one who crystallizes the greatest themes behind him:

[1] *Arkadi's name was coined by Caza when he was bored during a layover at Moscow airport, waiting for his plane to North Korea to work on the animated feature* Gandahar. *In retrospect, Caza discovered that the name was also that of a monastery in Crete, Greece.*
[2] *A reference to the Jean Cocteau film (1960).*

life, death, and love. Orpheus bears the terrible pain of having lost his beloved by his own fault. Guilty, he abandons his role, like Achilles withdrawing to his tent in the *Iliad*. Love beyond death, the Orpheus/Eurydice curse conveys the inconsolable loss. Could there be a stronger character? Reconstructed as a cyborg by Caza, *Or-Phe* remains a slave to his feelings. Human after all, Or-Phe is here a "golden" version of the Silver Surfer. Misanthropic and melancholic, he isolates himself in a citadel lost in the middle of nowhere (a tribute to Superman and his Fortress of Solitude?), leaving the inhabitants of Dis, "the technological city", alone and distraught. Compared to this confined, dying city where knowledge is preserved/captured in machines, Accaïa has remained in a state of nature, at the level of basic needs, a primitive society surviving in the few remaining livable margins. Dis-Accaia, Day-Night, man-machine, matter-spirit, creation-destruction, outside-in, known-forgotten binarity is the clear and absolute delimitation of this dual civilization. However, duality does not imply Manichaeism in Caza's work. In *Arkadi and the Lost Titan*, there is no absolute evil. It stems from unintentional human error, not from a perverse, conscious strategy. Evil is not individual, but the diffusive consequence of bad civilizational decisions.



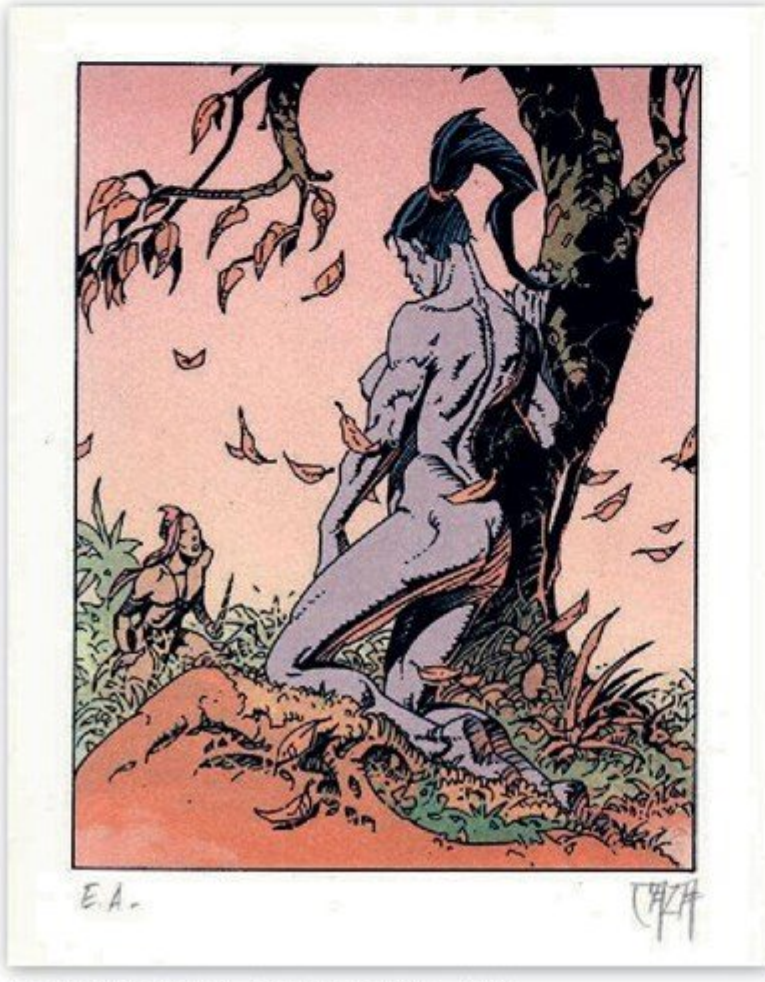
Arkadi, Pencil Sketch, 1997.

Or-Phe, Character Study, 2004.

As in the best dystopias, the political allegory is not far off. A world at a standstill, paralyzed, without energy, stagnant, is on the verge of slowly dying out. There is no hope, for even the gods are dead. They are merely machines, creations of man. In fact, they are neither worshiped nor feared, but used. They serve only a utilitarian purpose. He-Fas-Tus is the hideous blacksmith god, the metallurgist, while Pro-Me is a sort of giant mecha waiting to be awakened. A playful nod to HAL, the mad computer from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, but also to Hel, the ruler of an afterlife underworld in Norse mythology, infernal (yet maternal), Hel is the great computer-controller of society. Personified as a woman, Hel entrusts Or-Phe with the vital task of feeding humans a continuous stream of images to help them survive. It seems as though Caza was already prophesying, at the dawn of the public internet, the absurdity of our contemporary era, glued to screens and networks, as well as the grip of technology on our freedom to act. A data vampire and image plunderer, isn't Or-Phe also a precursor to generative artificial

intelligence? In this cold, mechanical, and amnesiac world, where culture has triumphed over the state of nature, Arkadi is the spark, the intruder who defies fate, the vital element that will reignite a dynamic and construct a new imaginary necessary to bring forth new narratives. To achieve this, Caza seems to have composed a reasoned catalog of all the genres and subgenres he loves. Readings from Edgar Rice Burroughs (*Barsoom*), Brian Aldiss (*Hothouse*), and insights from Gaston Bachelard, Mircea Eliade, and William Blake are blended and digested. Promoting the fluidity of genres in its own way, *Arkadi and the Lost Titan* combines post-apocalypticism, space opera, cyberpunk, heroic fantasy, witchcraft, supernatural... It also mixes alchemist and kabbalist traditions, furrows even towards the African tale, engulfs itself in Dante—the name of *Dis*, transliterated from the French version's "Dité," comes from one of the cities of Hell in the *Divine Comedy*. Oddly enough, all this cohabitates naturally, sealed under a broader mythological veneer (Norse, Greek, biblical, superheroic tales...) that finds a new incarnation in the episode inspired by the story of Jonah and the Whale (if not a nostalgic nod to Pinocchio stuck in Monstro).

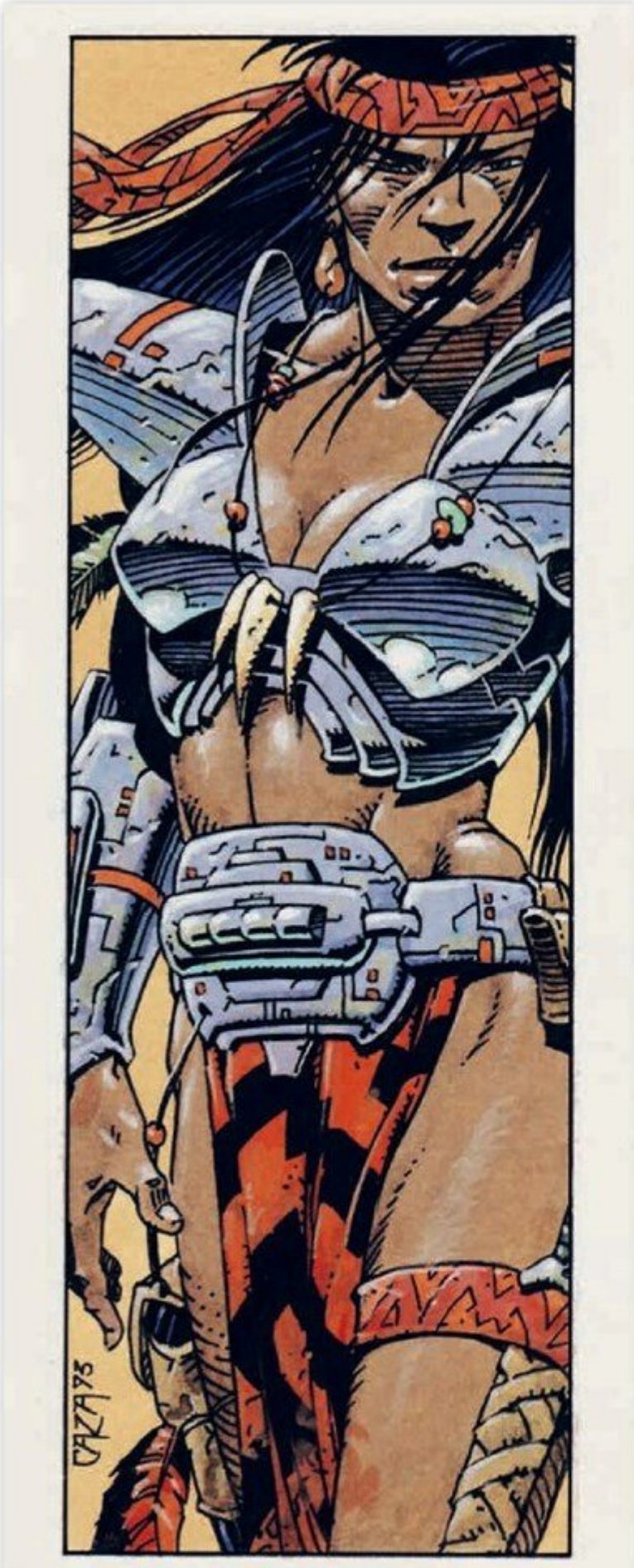
As Caza was compelled to extend his original plan and embarked on Chapter 6, reality oddly telescoped into the paralyzed, closed-off world he was depicting. This episode, which could almost be read independently, takes place in the biotope of an astonishing creature, Noone, who allows for life in a closed system, functioning as both a surrogate mother and an artificial paradise, where our heroes are not far from vegetating forever. Strangely premonitory, this episode conveys this state of suspension. As Caza, caught in the flow of ideas, finally envisioned at least ten volumes to complete his series, Humanoids, somewhat alarmed by the author's renewed enthusiasm, faced a difficult choice. Not without dilemma and regret, it was finally decided to rein in Caza's desires, urging him to anticipate the end of his story. Caza resigned himself to improvising a pseudo-conclusion as a stopgap measure. "Not ready for suicide," he still left the door slightly ajar in case of a possible continuation. Buried, succumbing to the Rad, adrift, the saga slipped into slumber. Frustrated, Caza bided his time, moving on to other collaborations, but he did not intend to leave things there. The wait would last several years, until another publishing house offered to reissue *L'Âge d'ombre* (in 1998), before signing for a new project set in the Arkadi universe. Cleverly, Caza proposed a standalone story. Sparked by a reader's desire to learn more about Lalena and the Nocturnals, the story took place in the past and fully explored the fantasy vein of the series through the Howardian journey of Arkadi's father, Arkas.



Pan-Dra Bookplate, Bleu Raspoutine, 1995.

Arkas Bookplate, Fantasmagories, 1999.

Bookmark, 1993.



Nocturnes in French (*Nocturnals* in the present edition), this prequel marked a new moment in the life of the series, ushering in a technical and narrative shift. Initiated in the late '90s, its creation coincided with the surge of manga in France. Caza's Kirby-esque storytelling felt the effect, becoming more drawn-out—proof that the author was always alert to the evolutions and potentialities of his medium. In that vein, this period, most notably, marked the rise of new digital tools available to artists. Caza quickly realized the opportunities these graphic facilitators offered. But having sworn by felt-tips, rOtring™, and pen, he didn't totally abandon traditional drawing on paper. At this point, he worked his pages with brushes and acrylics to concentrate on chromatic atmospheres, but his computer now assisted with the lettering. After digitizing the latter, Caza simply typed his texts to integrate them into his pages in a specific layer. It was more than a revelation, it was a revolution! This shift also allowed for the incorporation of effects previously unimaginable. The presence of holograms, a transparency or virtuality effect, pixelation—all things that could only be rendered by hand in a crude manner—were now made possible.[3] It seems a long time ago that Caza and his son rendered the city of Dis in the form of a large wooden and cardboard model one meter in diameter, so as to be able to grasp the proportions and perspectives! From this small theatrical set, one side of which was open to allow a view inside, Caza used to take numerous photos before tackling the actual drawing—a laborious, Benedictine task. At this point, he was able to have some of his sets made directly in 3-D wireframe, providing him with "the essentials"; all that remained was to choose the right angle of view before immersing himself in the graphic work. With the series reactivated with *Nocturnals* and the first chapter reworked, Caza was delighted to be able to resume telling the adventures of Arkadi, starting right where he left off as if the long hiatus had never happened. After so much anticipation, he was ready to give his all to what he to this day considered his best and most favorite episode. Costumes, narration, drawing—he took great care in every aspect of what resembled a personal "blockbuster." Going so far as to challenge himself—his admiration for Kirby and Buscema preventing him from ever considering himself an action artist—by stepping outside of his comfort zone to create increasingly spectacular battles, such as Pan-Dra's fight against her degenerate clone, which, to hear him tell it, could have taken up many more pages!

Free of its shackles, the story gathers momentum and moves towards its resolution with the revelation of the origin of the mysterious Mass and the role of

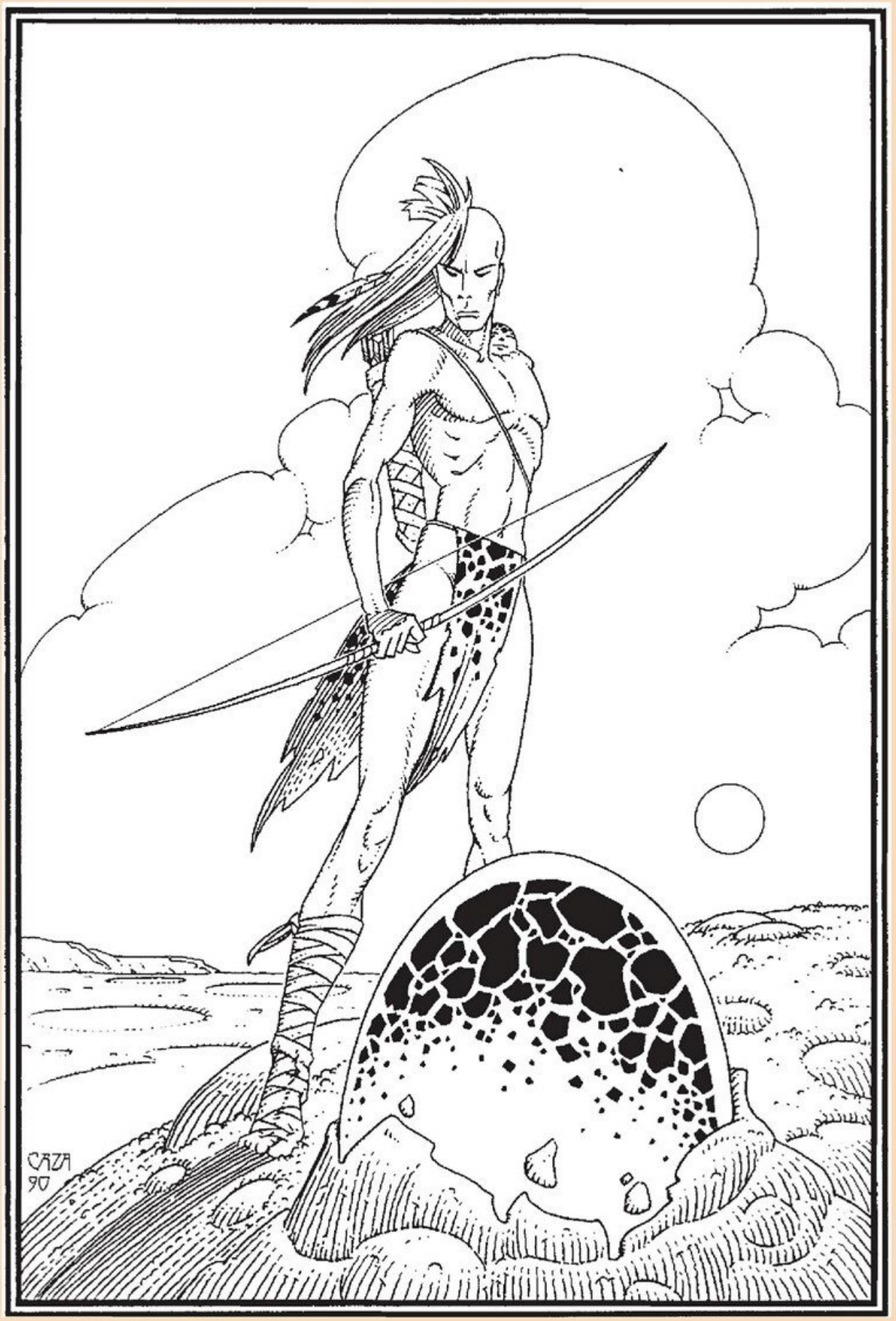
[3] *As early as Chapter 1, published in 1999, Caza experimented with the Amiga for the sequence of U-Ri-D-C asleep/dead as seen through Or-Phe's eyes. At the time of* Nocturnals *and for Chapters 7, 8 and 9, Caza switched to the Mac.*

Nocturnals, Ink Drawing, 1999.

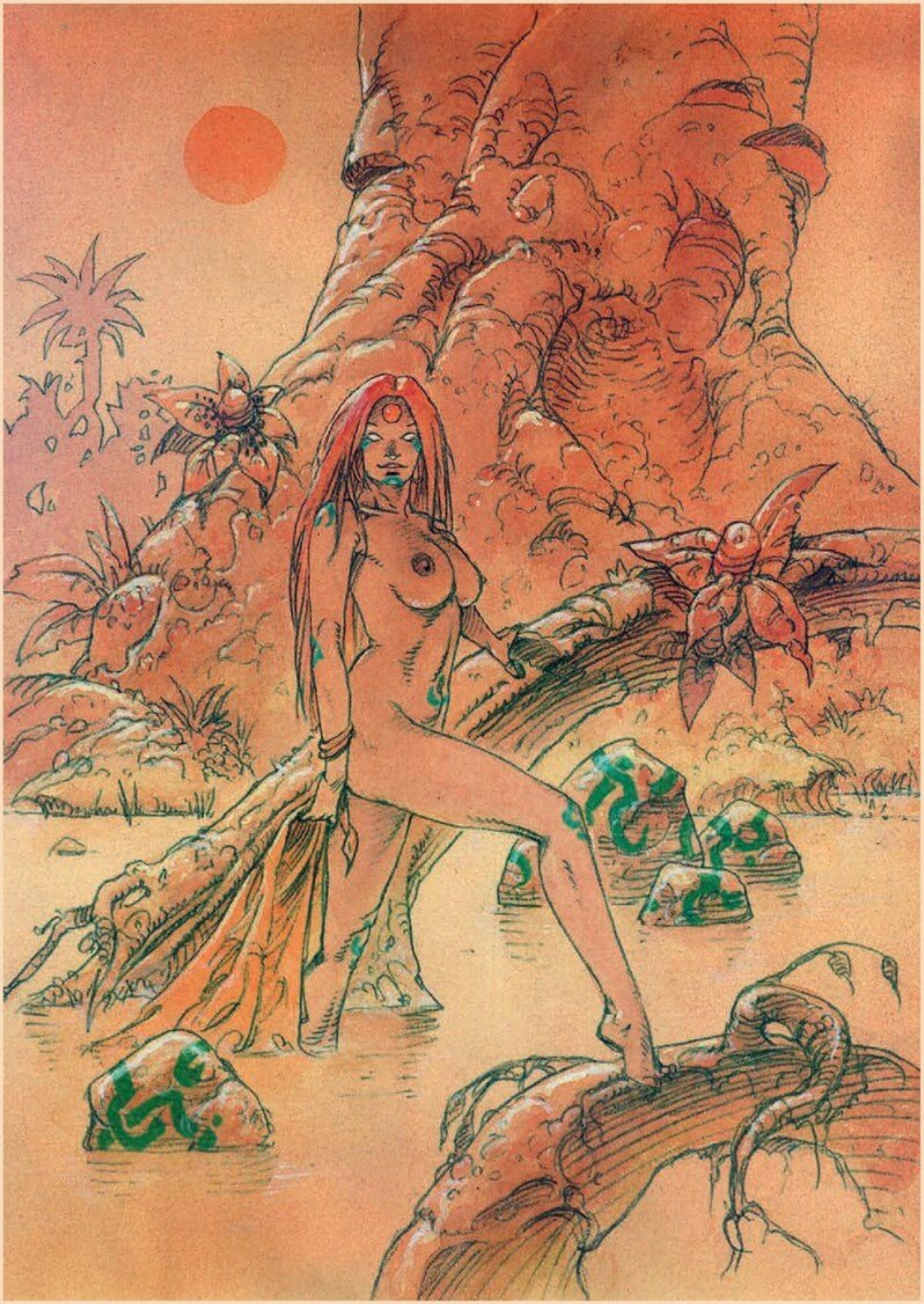
Kro-No, the creature born of unbridled scientism. A child of the Cold War, Caza, like all his generation, grew up under the threat of weapons. He chose to address this fear not through atomic bombing, but in a more insidious way, through the danger of civilian nuclear power and its muted, long-term repercussions. A lifelong anti-nuclear activist, Caza, like French science-fiction writer Stefan Wul in his book *Niourk* (another major influence on this series), is concerned about the proliferation of nuclear waste, the disposal of which we still have not figured out and the radiation which lasts tens or even hundreds of thousands of years. Caza doesn't believe in burial as a miracle solution, and warns discreetly but surely of the deleterious effects on the environment and the health of future generations. Beneath the appearance of a light and entertaining series, Arkadi stands as a catharsis for the author, his means of exorcising the terror of a monstrous, uncontrollable golem awakening: Kro-No, both a morbid countdown and the technological incarnation of Cronos, the titan who devoured his own children in Greek mythology. A dubious god, embodying this science without conscience, this progress inherently ambivalent and complex . All that remains of the engineers' laudable intentions is eternal pollution and time frozen in radiation.

Mutation and hybridization remain the means of overcoming the curse. The transversal and ambiguous theme of metamorphosis, whether desired or imposed, runs throughout the series, and it is from this that salvation against the inescapable will come, like an antibody secreted by a sick organism. A mutant work, *Arkadi and the Lost Titan* is a bestiary of freaks, deformities, and abnormalities, as well as fluid sexual and gender identities, starting with Arkadi's companions, Om-6/Jonas and Radon, who continually changes appearance depending on his environment, as well as U-Ri-D-C, the dead, "asexual" Chosen One who comes to inhabit the muscular body of Pan-Dra, herself made from the genetic code of the very virile Arkas. Polymorphic, the truculent warrior experiences a certain slackening in Noone, a rare light-hearted moment in the series. For his part, Arkadi is stuck with a bubon, an evil hybrid, symbolically erasing his father, who is *ultimately* replaced by Or-Phe's head. The bright face replaces the dark face, and the fused arm becomes the artist's hand.

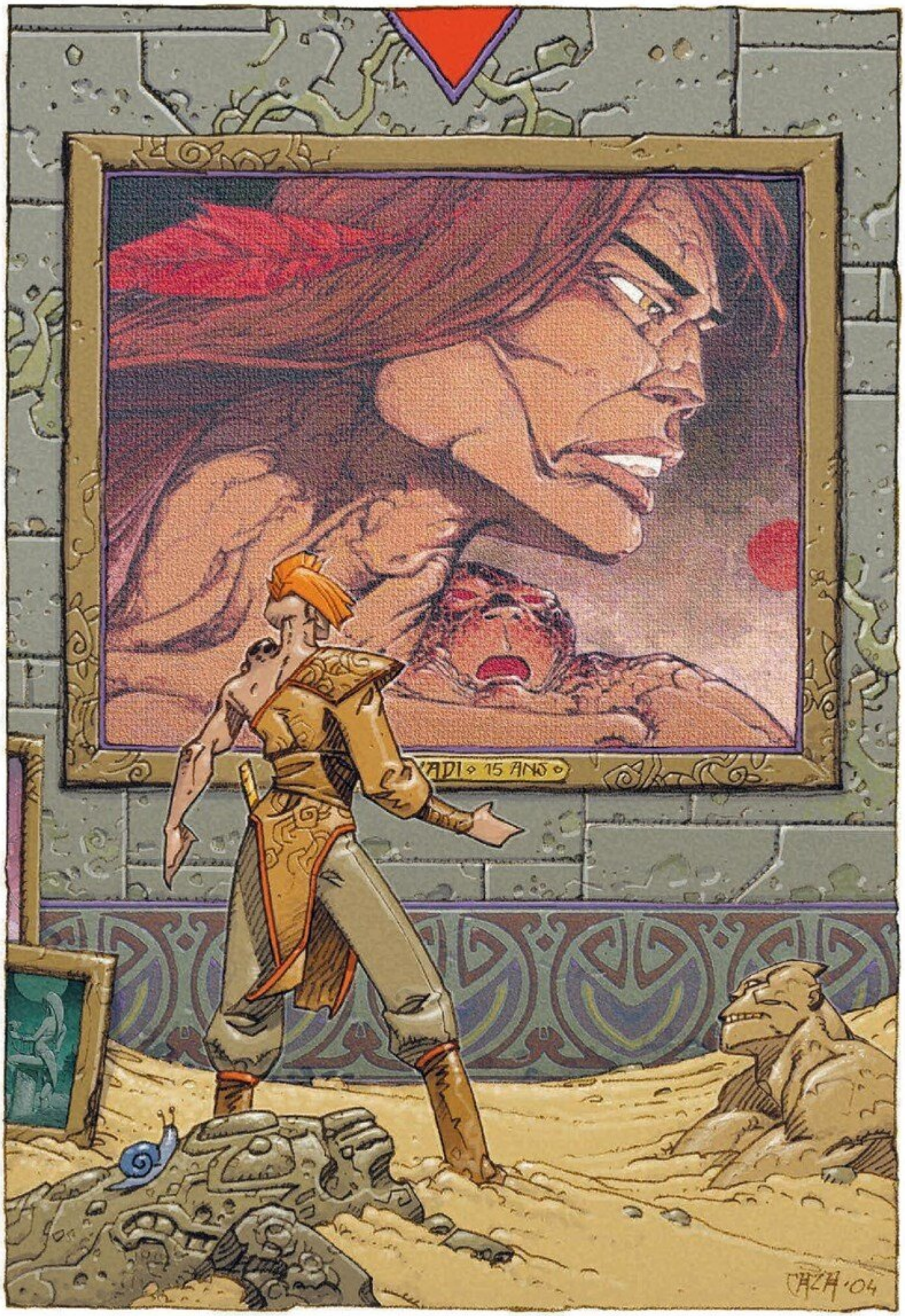
Arkas, Pencil Sketch, 2003 (top) and Acrylic Painting, 2004 (bottom).



Arkadi, Print, Le Pythagore, 1990.



Albe, Watercolor Bookplate, Splitter Verlag, 1995.



Arkadi, Digital Painting, Nageur, 2004.

God and Man, Pencil Sketch, Pythagore, 1993.

A messianic figure called upon by destiny, Arkadi is the man of tainted blood, the impure, who brings life to the all-technical. Like the alchemist transforming lead into gold, he initiates the great reversal, the Black Work that will allow the Mass to become that primordial egg which designates the image of perfection, totality, in the Orphic theogony. In short, Arkadi is the one through whom the world will be reborn. The reign of lethargy ends. Arkadi has returned from a dead world to awaken it, just as Or-Phe has returned from the world of the dead. The vital creative impulse has set the world back in motion, and allowed it to regenerate. What better parable of the role of the artist? In this highly structured saga, Caza has worked like an alchemist. A skilled weaver, he has patiently woven together the threads of his story, having fun creating multiple echoes between different scenes and characters. The kiss between Arkas and the decapitated Lalena is linked to Pan-Dra's kiss on Or-Phe's head (revisiting Salomé's kiss in reverse), while Caza closes his hero's circular journey with allusions to the Golden Fleece and Albe's face, looping back to the first chapter. A kind of arabesque in the narrative continuity, these assonances and symmetries are sometimes involuntary, unconscious, as when the author realized that there was a temporal coincidence

between Or-Phe's installation at the Antarc Castle and Kro-No's calls to Arkadi. To this day, Caza marvels at this fascinating turn of the involuntary mind, worthy of "a true Jungian synchronicity!"

Over the twenty years of its publication, from 1989 to 2008, this mutant tale has been transformed, *mutatis mutandis* if only by its stylistic trajectory—where the cold, technical line of the early days gradually gives way to a more ethereal modeling. When he put the finishing touches to the final volume, Caza recalls not so much relief as the satisfaction of a job well done, happy "to have gotten where he wanted to." Like his hero who reached the end of his labyrinthine odyssey, Caza came back victorious from a creative minotaur that could have devoured him. Although the idea of spinning off secondary characters was on his mind for a while, he didn't do it, leaving the reader free to dream indefinitely about Pan-Dra's mysterious past. In fact, the beautiful warrior would become Caza's favorite character[4], admitting that he even shed a tear as he illustrated her death.

Arkadi and the Lost Titan, perhaps more deeply than any of his other works, reflects Caza's fascinations, dreams, anxieties, and vulnerabilities. It can be read as a mirror of himself, and retrospectively, as a distorting speculation on the entropy engulfing our societies. Behind a universal common trunk, all great stories are there to haunt us like ghosts emerging from the ruins of an ancient, immemorial past. One thing is certain: even cloaked, there is no doubt that Caza's reinterpretation of the Orpheus story will continue to mutate, to be reinterpreted again and again by future generations through readings and re-readings. As is the alchemy of great works.

Nicolas Trespallé *is an art historian and French cultural journalist.*

Unicorn, Pencil Sketch, 2003.

[4] "I love women with Lois Lane's legs...and Superman's shoulders." —Caza

Festival Poster, 2004.

GLOSSARY OF PROPER NOUNS AND TERMS FROM THE STILL ERA

The (D) following a word indicates vocabulary specific to the city of Dis. The (A) indicates Accaia.

ABBADIR (A): The aeroliths falling regularly from the Moon Ring are commonly referred to as "moon-stones". Magicians gave them the name "abbadir," linked to the ancient symbolism of the Black Moon, which reveals the dark side of reality.

ACCAIA: A village in the so-called "Mediterra" region, located in the previously submerged bedrock of what was once the volcanic island of Santorini. A number of favorable conditions have made it one of the few inhabitable enclaves on the fixed Earth: the waters of the Acme provide abundant irrigation, the high slopes of a crater protect the village from the Salt-Winds, and its orientation means that one side receives permanent sunlight while the other is perpetually shaded. The village's dwellings, the sleep houses, are built on this side. The sunny side is the domain of the watchful eye: terraced cultivation, craftsmen's workshops, etc. Accaia lives in total self-sufficiency, primarily from fishing and farming, and has no contact with the off-world, which is considered taboo.

AGE OF SHADOWS: An ill-defined period between the end of the Industrial Age and the beginning of the Still Age. This is the era that saw the slowing of the Earth's rotation, the birth of the Others and the end of the Oms.

ARC and ANTARC: 36 meridians join the Night Pole (Alpha) to the Day Pole (Omega). Two of these have been given the names Arc and Antarc, their course passing through the ancient poles. Their nicknames Governor and Conception come from an analogy with acupuncture meridians.

BIO-DOCS (D): Clo-D, the white one, Lake-D, the gray one, and Atro-D, the black one, are Dis' three bio-docs. Doctors—biologists and geneticists specializing in the cloning of organs and completion of "human" beings, they are responsible—along with the psycho-docs—for maintaining the physical and mental health of the Chosen Ones (see *Sopharques*).

CARDINAL POINTS:
ALPHA (α) : corresponds to the Night Pole, center of the nocturnal hemisphere (geographical position of Dis).
OMEGA (Ω) : indicates the management of the Day Pole.
DELTA (Δ) : to the right, looking towards Omega.
GAMMA (χ) : to the left, looking towards Omega.

CHLOROCEPHALS: Radon-like, half-human, half-batrachian mutants distinguished by the emerald-green color of their skulls, their bad temper, and their immoderate taste for slime. They live in the salt marshes of the lowest overhangs, close to the last land seas (or pits).

CHOSEN (D): Inhabitants of Dis. At the beginning of the Still Era, faced with the deterioration of living conditions on Earth and the general degeneration of humanity, the engineers selected a human strain that was still genetically sound and established it in the walled city of Dis. To avoid internal social problems—anything that might threaten the serenity and durability of Dis—the sexual functions of the Chosen Ones are inhibited by certain components of the chemical nutrient on which they feed. They reproduce

by in vitro fertilization, and experience platonic lovemaking through a ritual of mental communion via dream-screens. A Chosen One lives for 40 years, after which his or her body is recycled. But for the Hel central computer, the spirit of each Chosen One is precious. Hel keeps a memory record (or "persona") of each of them, updated regularly. So, when certain particularly precious subjects die, Hel can implant this persona in a clone.

CINABRE: In alchemy, the effect of sulfur on mercury would be to "kill" it. But this "death" is a transmutation that produces *cinabre,* considered the elixir of immortality.

CITY-OF-NO-RETURN (A): In the mythology of various peoples close to Twilight, the souls of the dead are supposed to be carried by the winds to the City-Of-No-Return, a hell or empyrean located "at the center of the Night" (this mythical situation corresponds to the - very real - situation of Dis). The legend does not explain how the winds, which blow eternally from Night to Day, can carry souls to the center of Night (see *Winds*).

COUNTING TIME (A):
SLEEP, EVE, and DAY: As there is no natural alternation between night and day, these last two terms have been replaced by "sleep" for the period devoted to rest, and "eve" for that devoted to activity. A day (sleep + eve) lasts 24 of our hours, or 12 gongs. Gong servants have been specially trained in the mental counting of time since early childhood.
CYCLE: Period corresponding to our lunar month. Its calculation is based on the female menstrual cycle. Moreover, as there are no seasons to mark the phases, there is no word to designate the year. So it's only by virtue of an ancient tradition that we continue to count cycles by twelve. Thus, to designate a period of one year, we say: "12 cycles." To indicate a person's age, for example, we say: "15 times 12 cycles."

CYBORG (D): Composite being: a combination of electronic machine and living being (a modern man with a pacemaker is a cyborg). Dis' Titans are either robots or cyborgs.

DIS: The world's last city, created in year zero of the Still Era, a sanctuary of knowledge, technology, and genetic purity: a kind of monastery buried in the ice of the Night Pole and protected from the fearsome living conditions of the Great Exterior, Dis is home to 2,000 inhabitants, the Chosen Ones, whose material needs are provided by the Titans. The living alcoves are distributed along a hollow cone descending in an Archimedean spiral, a funnel covered by a bluish dome (the sky) and lit by a central mini-sun (see *Pro-Me*). The first circle, the highest and widest, contains the above-ground greenhouses. On the lowest circle, the ninth, is Hel's headquarters. But Dis also has a number of extensions in the mass of ice: the technical installations for maintenance—heating, air, water, etc—and the dead memory shaft housing the gigantic memories of the past (unbeknownst to most: this shaft leads even further into the depths of the Earth, to the mysterious places where Legion reigns). Dis has the disadvantage of being an in vitro culture, a closed, "perfect" system that exchanges too little energy and information with the outside world, and is therefore susceptible to being shaken by the slightest incident.

DREAM-SCREEN (D): Cut off from the world and devoid of sexual life for ten millennia of peace and comfort, Dis' Chosen Ones are incapable of dreaming for themselves; yet dreaming is a nourishment, a physiological as well as a psychological need, the deprivation of which can lead to schizophrenia and death. To preserve the sanity of the Chosen few, the engineers have equipped each alcove with a dream-screen. The Titan Or-Phe, poet and traveler, is in charge of capturing images and sensations in the Great Exterior, shaping them into empathic multi-sensory simulations, nicknamed "dreams" or "images," and broadcasting them on the screens, which enable all elected members to immerse themselves in these virtual dreams (warning: too frequent use of the dream-screen leads to addiction.)

FIRE-FLARE: For the average fire-flare, lurking at the bottom of its infundibuliform crater in the middle of the overburden, the survival strategy is, like today's anteater, to shoot at anything that moves in order to

make it fall into its mouth, where it will be cooked and digested in a single operation—an effective gastronomic practice, but questionable when you're a victim yourself. The physiology of fire blight, which evokes a cross between a mutant neuropterous insect and a landmine, remains improbable in the absence of serious research.

FIRE SALT: Sulfur, or volcanic sulfide. It is used by magicians for their magical practices. Sulfur is the active principle of alchemy. It corresponds to the element Fire, just as mercury corresponds to the element Water.

GIBBERING FROTH (D): Deprived of the dreams usually provided by Or-Phe, Dis' Chosen Ones find themselves prone to numerous psychosomatic ailments such as cachexia, elementary infoxication, anorexia nervosa, grochemar, obsessive spoiling, death-in-the-soul, early metaphysical anguish, pedunculosis, solitary exhibitionism, and the gibbering froth that translates into oral releases of plasmated fantasies (or "psychorragia"). Many of these ailments lead to early death and recycling.

GLAVA: A foamy secretion resulting from the revolting sexual practices of the glaviotte, a mutant imparisyllabic mollusc born of the unlikely cross between the glareola and the lepiote.

GREAT EXTERIOR (D): For Dis' Chosen Ones, the rest of the world is the Great Exterior. The term carries a connotation of fear and prohibition: the Great Exterior is considered the domain of barbarism, an unhealthy, deadly chaos—though not entirely accurate. Physically and psychologically fragile due to their assisted lifestyle, the Chosen few can't leave the city without suffering. Agoraphobia is a vital neurosis for them: they would be unable to survive outside the enclosed city of Dis.

HALF-LIFE (D): Abiosis or suspended animation, a state of apparent death comparable to hibernation. In fact, a state closer to coma than to sleep: the half-living are above all half-dead.

HEL: Dis' central computer, Hel is first and foremost the custodian of human knowledge from past millennia, in other words, an enormous data bank. She is also an artificial intelligence with a feminine personality, linked to her maternal role with the Chosen Ones: nourishing them physically and mentally, ensuring their survival, happiness, and safety by every means possible. Hel is able not only to converse vocally, but also to project an animated three-dimensional human image, a holobody that can metamorphose according to the personality of the interlocutor. Although immaterial, Hel's holobody deploys an electromagnetic field that enables her to manipulate small objects.

KMET and MET: Units of length. Semantic degradation of our terms "kilometer" and "meter."

LEGION: Legion is the most secretive of the Titans. His appearance and personality are unique and multiple at the same time: a single mind, a single program, for thousands of robotic bodies—an army of lead ants. His role is to hunt down all destructive radioactive byproduct and imprison it within The Mass, which he also guards.

LUZ (A): A kind of divinatory third eye, it enables us to *see*, i.e. to resonate, via the pineal gland, with the hidden face of reality: the anima mundi. This amber talisman is handed down from generation to generation by the caste of magicians of Accaia (from a technological point of view, the luz is an ancient electronic sensor linked to the mirrors of the surviving D.R.E.A.M. network).

MACHINE-GOD: Term used by the primitive peoples of the Great Exterior to designate the cybernetic powers that haunt the world (Hel, Legion, the Titans, Kro-No), beings of which they generally have only a vague notion based on legends.

MASS: Hel's database query: "Confidential data / Access denied."

MEDITERRA: The territories discovered by the disappearance of the Mediterranean Sea now bear this name. In the 10,000 years of the Still Era, intense evaporation on the Day side and the fixation of water as ice on the Night side led to a general drying out of the earth's surface and a drop in sea levels of around 3,000 meters. This gave rise to the "death-depths," dried-up seabeds of the past.

NETWORK (D) : Before the Still Era, there would have been a worldwide network of Digital Reality Echoed through Artificial Mirrors (D.R.E.A.M.). A user of the network could enter simulations and share these dreams with other users around the world. It is said that this is how humans, having entrusted their dreams to machines, lost all creativity and imagination, and became the Oms. It's also said that during the great catastrophes linked to the slowing of the Earth's rotation, the neglected network was largely destroyed, causing dreams to leak out. This electron fog formed a dream field which warped and changed those living in its reach. Some did not survive an encounter with the dream field, but others would receive an enhanced perception that would be passed to their offspring, but only from mother to daughter, leading to a long line of female magicians bearing the luz on their forehead. In the Still Era, only a few screens remain scattered around the world, some of them still interconnected.

NOCTURNALS: Inhabitants of Night. Carnivorous mutants, degenerate wolf-like humans. They are also said to be telepathic. For people living near Twilight, the Nocturnals are the ogres whose incursions are feared, resulting in the kidnapping of women and babies. Nocturnals can interbreed with humans. Lalena (Vol. 1) is said to be a half-Nocturnal...

NUTRIENT (D): Food for the Chosen. A paste made from plants grown in the hydroponic greenhouses of Dis' first circle, the nutrient is said to contain various synthetic additives, details of which are marked "Confidential data / Access denied."

PERSONA (D) : Hel's periodic computerized copy of a Chosen personality. In a mechanistic, transhumanist vision, the persona contains and represents the entire spirit of the Chosen One. In a more subtle vision, we fear that the persona is merely the most superficial expression of the personality, the "social self."

PRO-ME (D) : One of the Titans of Dis. The technology behind its creation dates back to the time when engineers were looking to fusion energy as an alternative to conventional nuclear energy (known as "fission"). Its role is to bring back, every hundred years, a piece of molten plasma that will form a mini-artificial sun under the dome of Dis. Between missions, too vast and too hot to stay within Dis' walls, Pro-Me rests—and cools—somewhere in the Great Exterior, waiting for the programmed signal that will give him the order to leave. His last mission was in 9,935; he should have left in 10,035.

PURE-BLOOD (A): Adult Accaian having undergone the blood purgation test. Also known as true-man (as opposed to "radon" or "rotted-blood").

RIGHT-TO-LIFE (A): A tradition linked to the problem of population control in the village of Accaia. The tribe, living self-sufficiently on a restricted territory, cannot afford to see its population grow beyond the food capacity of its "island." Various rituals under the control of the Ghevora clan chief ensure that only the fittest survive. This rigor is offset by the Council of Elders and the counter-power of the Mothers. Thus, in certain cases, the right-to-life can be offered or exchanged.

RING-MOON: When the Earth's rotation came to a halt, gravitational stresses caused our moon to break up. The fragments then gathered in low orbit, forming a ring comparable to that of Saturn. This ring revolves around the Earth at roughly the same rate as the ancient Moon (one revolution = one cycle.) The orbit passes over the Night and Day Poles, as well as the ancient terrestrial poles, the Arctic and Antarctic.

SHEOL (A): Accaia's third crater. Its depth and the mists that fill it make it a place of pestilence and dark-

ness. It is home to a mutant, semi-human, scotopic people, the radons.

SOMA (A): Liqueur made from the plant of the same name. But the word, by unconscious semantic assimilation with its homograph "soma," also designates the human body, the organism.

SOPHARCHS (D): Wise rulers. Class of elected representatives who occasionally assist Hel in managing Dis' affairs. They include, in particular, bio-docs, psycho-docs, and Infos (programmers and Om-systems). The Sopharchs meet as a Council when a problem is beyond Hel's competence. In the 10,000 years of its existence, Hel has only had to convene this Council 763 times. The last known meeting concerned the Or-Phe elopement (year 10,025 of the Still Era).

STATIONARY EARTH: A misnomer. In reality, the Earth always revolves around the Sun in one year, but turns on itself at the same time. This is known as "synchronous rotation", analogous to that of the Moon around the Earth.

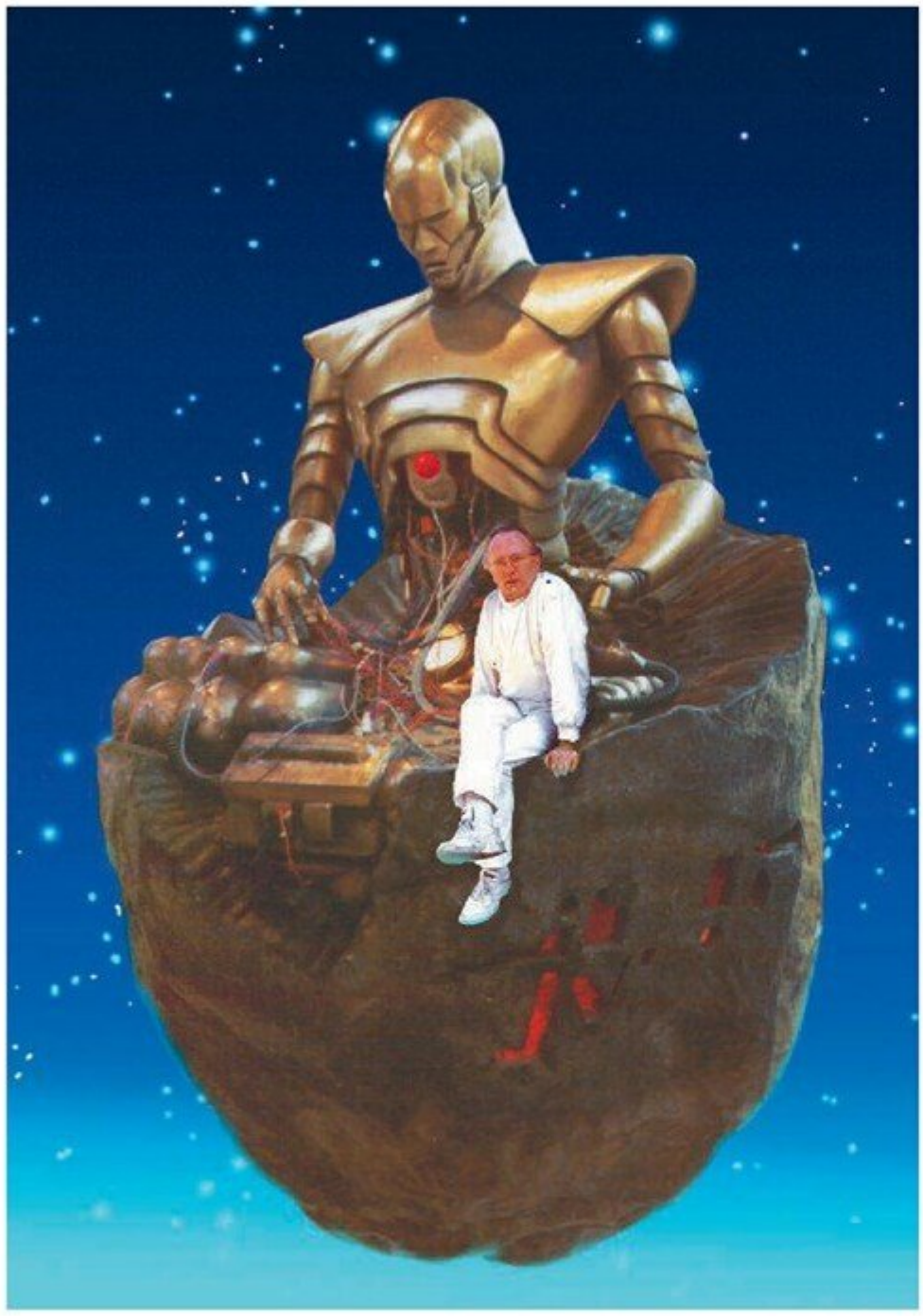
THOAT: Scaly, quadrupedal saurian resulting from uncontrolled mutations during the reign of Rad. The thoat is generally red and lives in the diurnal hemisphere. It can be used as a mount by those who know how to tame it. Normally herbivorous and peaceful, it can be ferocious in combat if pushed by its rider's empathic hold.

TITANS (D): The servants of the city of Dis. Most of them are composites of man and machine, cyborgs, more efficient than mere humans thanks to their mechanical power, and more efficient than mere robots thanks to human intelligence and decision-making power. In addition to Pro-Me, He-Fas-Tus, and Or-Phe, we'd like to mention: *Oke-An*, shaped like a giant worm: it gnaws at the ice cap, heating and melting the ice in its belly and supplying Dis with water. *A-Tlan*, a complex of electromagnetic jacks and grapples supporting Dis' dome and the ice "sky" above it, as well as the mini-sun supplied by Pro-Me. *Garm*, animated by a canine brain, guards the city's entrances. *Ori-On*, who protects the city from falling moonstones. Others are more primitive, purely robotic: *Me-Duz*, robot probes, vacuum cleaners, air conditioners, gardeners, cooks, etc. The Titans were named after ancient mythological models and modeled according to the visual canons of a branch of industrial-age folklore listed in Hel's archives under the (incidentally disputed) term "Comic Wonders," inspired by the same psychological axiom that presided over the creation of screens: man needs heroes, legends, dreams.

TWILIGHT (A): The 20° wide area running around the Earth at equal distance from the Day and Night Poles that is the only space naturally habitable to the remaining clans of humans.

WINDS (Black-Winds, High-Winds, Salt-Winds)**:** The high air temperature on the day side (Day) creates a permanent atmospheric low over this hemisphere, which attracts cold air masses from the night side (Night). At ground level, particularly over Twilight, winds blow continuously from Night to Day. These air masses converge on the Day Pole, and there, warmed up, rise and spread out like a mushroom in the upper atmosphere. Upward thrust pushes this air further and further away from the Day Pole, until it reaches the Dark Hemisphere. Altitude Winds, or High-Winds, blow continuously from Day to Night. On the icy night side, these cooled air masses descend, only to be attracted again by the atmospheric depression on the day side. And the cycle continues. Various local names refer to the winds: on Twilight, the word Black-Wind is often used. In the village of Accaia, and more generally in all the overburden, they speak of Salt-Winds due to the amount of salt in the air.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



"If you remove the obstacle, you destroy the path..."
Yvonne Caroutch,
Le Livre de la licorne

Caza and Or-Phe, Collage, 1994.

The sculpture (pictured left) was part of an interactive exhibition entitled "Mégalithes," created by Pascal Dejax and his company Pavillon Noir.

On the occasion of a comic book festival, the press announced that meteorites had fallen on the town. The result was a series of street scenes with parodic Ghostbusters-style decontamination. The open meteorites were then displayed in an exhibition room, containing sculptures by Beb Deulm, Caza, Mœbius, Mézières and Vatine. This exhibition toured various festivals in France, including Colomiers, near Toulouse, in 1994.

To the Smulkowskis: Scarlett and Dorothée for preparing the colors, and Grégory for modeling the sets.

Thanks also to the Symbolist painters whose works adorn the walls of Château d'Antarc, and to the authors and poets I've quoted or paraphrased to get Or-Phe talking: William Blake, John Keats, King Solomon, Jean Cocteau, Jean de Patmos, Charles Baudelaire, Victor Hugo, William Shakespeare, John Dowland, Arthur Rimbaud, Guillaume Apollinaire, Alphonse de Lamartine, Charles-Marie Leconte de Lisle, Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné, Dante Alighieri, Gérard de Nerval, F.W. Murnau, T.S. Eliot, Maurice Carême, Saint-John Perse, Alfred de Musset, Lewis Carroll (and maybe a few others I'm forgetting...).

—Caza